

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Revelation 2:18-29 **“The Danger Of A Too Tolerant Faith”**

April 10, 2016
(2nd Sunday After Easter)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IID, REVELATION 2:18-29
"THE DANGER OF A TOO TOLERANT FAITH"

Later Succumbed To Montanism

1) v.18a Introductory "Angelic" Formula.

Many Trade Guilds (Unions)/ Met In Temples: See Article
Mirror & Opposite Image Of Ephesus Problem: Rigid v. Lax
Least Known/ Remarkable Of The 7 Cities (Modern *Akhisar*)

18a "And to the angel of the **church** in Thyatira write:

Intersection, Big Wool/Textile Industries, Purple Dye (Madder Root), Acts 16:14-15

2) v.18b Characterization of the Risen Lord from 1:16-20 (Ps. 2:9 Below).

Important Title

Ps. 2:7 (Echo), Rome Not Tolerate Religions That Made Universal Claims = Absolute Relativism

b 'The words of *the Son of God* who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.'

Coinage, v. Imperial Cult Linked To Apollo, Son Of Zeus, Temple In Thyatira
2:23b, *Local Sun God v. Son of God Only Here*, //2:9 Below, Insight/Stability
Realm Of Divine, Guild Of Bronze Workers In Thyatira, 1:14, 15
Statues For Roman Emperors As Barefoot = Entered Realm Of The Gods

3) v.19 Praise Formula: "I know your works."

Praise (vv.19, 24-25) / Blame Mingled

19 a I know your works:

Notice Repetition (4x) *Works*, Busy But Not Discerning, What's Missing?
Works = Responsible Christian Conduct Grounded In True Faith/Virtues

b your love and faith and

2:4 Unlike Ephesus

b' service and patient endurance,

13:10, 4 Theological Virtues [Faith, Love, Service, Patience] + Works = Growth

a' and that your later works exceed the first.

Positives: Orthodox/Ethical/Growing In Both, *Very Methodist!*
Pergamum Had Error, Thyatira Tolerates It = Pluralism

4) v.20 Chastisement: "This against you."

Issue Of Accommodation //1 Cor. 8-10, Acts 15:19-20, 29

20 But I have this against you,

John's Hard-line Approach, Inside Problem, Possible Cancer In A Good Church?
? = True And False Love/Tolerance; If Not Tolerate, No Beguiling

that you tolerate the woman "Jezebel",

//v.14 (Pergamum), Code Name: , Villain, Baal Worship

who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants

1 Kgs. 16:29-34, 18:4, 19; 2 Kgs. 9:22-37

1) to practice immorality and

porneia // 2:20, Hos. 4:10, Foreign Queen, Baal /850 False Prophets

2) to eat food sacrificed to idols.

Trade Guilds, Patron Deities/Temples //2:14-15 Pergamum

Acts 15:19-20, 29; 1 Cor. 10:19-22 (Idols As Demonic), Ease Tension With Culture

5) vv.21-23 Call To Repentance for Some, Encouragement for Others.

Distinct Identity

21 a I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality.

Metaphorical Use Of Sexual Imagery? Compromise Is *Alluring*

God's Patience, Hos. 4:10

22 b Behold, I will throw her on a sickbed,

Time Up! 1 Cor. 11:30, Ex. 21:18, Illness As Punishment

and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation (distress).

Collusion

What Degree Of Assimilation Can Be Tolerated? How Long?

23 a' unless they repent of her works;

Divine Patience Continues, Church Tolerates Heresy, Conditional Judgment

b' and I will strike her children (i.e. followers) dead.

Ezek. 33:27, Take Christians Out! Excise A Cancer

And *all the churches* shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart (lit. kidneys),.

Ps. 51

and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

v.18b, Jer. 17:10, Piercing Eyes See The Depths

"No eternal security except as persons continue to conquer..." (Mulholland: 115)

3') vv.24-25 Praise A Second Time.

3 Groups: 1) Jezebelites, 2) Tolerators, 3) Faithful Resisters

24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not *hold* this teaching,

The Church, Two Pastoral Strategies// Our Times

who have not learned what some call 'the deep things' of *Satan*,

Split, Stubbornly Keep Orthodoxy/Ethics In Place

to you I say, 'I do not lay upon you any other burden;

Enigma? John's Sarcasm? "Deep Things Of God"

only hold fast to what you have, until I come.'

Divided Church, Hold On & Hold Out! Continue *As Is*

Faithfulness, Issue = Assimilation To Culture vs. Non-Assimilation

Soft Love That Rejects Nothing

7) vv.26-28 Promised Rewards (2) to Conquerors.

Roman Legions Carried Venus' Zodiac Sign = Bull

26 a He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end,

Here Calvinists (Never Had It!) & Arminians (Lost It!) Agree On Who Is Not Saved

b *I will give him* "power over the nations,

Military Image, Not Assimilate: To Goodness, Add Discernment

and he shall rule them with a rod of iron,

20:4, 1st Benefit: Shared Rule In Kingdom

as when earthen pots are broken in pieces,"

19:15, **Psalm 2:8-9** (Messianic/Royal Psalm), 1 Cor. 6:2

Fallen Babylon Will Be Shattered!

a' even as I myself have received power from my Father

Christ Shares His Rule With Us, Himself As Well

b' *and I will give to him* the morning star (Venus).

Jesus In 22:16! Dan. 12:3, 2 Pt. 1:19, 2nd Benefit: Immortality

Num. 24:17, 2 Pt. 1:19, Venus = Bright New Day, Emperors Claimed Descent From Venus

6) v.29 Call to Hear What the Spirit Says.

Isolation vs. Absorption

29 He who has an ear,

Possible 8:2 Chiasm: 1-2-3-4//4'-3'-2'-1'

let him hear what the Spirit says to the **churches**!

Physical Ear, Ear Of Understanding

How To Be *In* But Not *Of*?

4/7. Longest Of The Seven Letters

THE DANGER OF A TOO TOLERANT CHURCH

"But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel...."

What the risen Lord thinks of rampant theological pluralism.

REVELATION 2 : 2 0 a

You pick up your car up from the shop after a tune-up and the technician says, "This car is in great shape. You must be an automotive genius to take such great care of your car."

Later that day, your brakes don't work; you're out of brake fluid. You could have died. So you go back to the shop, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, I didn't want you to feel bad. To be honest, I was afraid you'd get upset with me. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted."

You can't believe what you're hearing, "I didn't come here for a little fantasy-based ego boost! When it comes to my car, I want the truth."

Or imagine going to the doctor for a physical. "What a magnificent physical specimen," the doc exclaims, "You have the body of an Olympian. Congratulations!"

Later that day while climbing the stairs, your heart gives out. Your arteries are so clogged you're only one jelly doughnut away from the grim reaper.

So you go back to the office, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well," he says, "I knew your body is in worse shape than the Pillsbury dough boy, but if I tell people stuff like that, they get offended. It's bad for business. They don't come back. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted."

You'd be furious! "When it comes to my body, Doc, I want the truth!"¹

Obviously, when something matters, you don't want illusory comfort based on pain avoidance. You want the truth.

Have you noticed, as I have, how much of American pop-Christianity is a about

¹ John Ortberg, www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/august/7081511.

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good feelings? How to generate them, how to keep them going, how to use the insights of the faith to maintain a PMA– a positive mental attitude. Sort of a *Jesus-as-Valium* approach. Our values are entertainment, practicality, simplicity, relevance, and– above all– positive, inspirational feelings for a motivated life of individual self-fulfillment on our terms. So you now understand why pastors so often feel the culture’s pressure to be like the fraudulent mechanic or the lying physician, and you see such on TV because this stuff sells.

Not long ago I was having a bit of a frustrating conversation with a church member in the hallway just outside the office, and finally I looked at her and asked, “Why do people want their surgeons to be experts and their pastors to be nice?” She didn’t have an answer. I think it was a new idea.

I’ve spent a lot of time studying the gospels, the four official biographies of Jesus, and I will tell you that Jesus is a truth-teller and truth-doer, the only one whose words matched his deeds and who deeds enacted his words with perfect integrity. He speaks and does truth with the highest and best of motives, which is divine love– a passionate concern about each and all of us– but he does not cut anyone slack for the sake of their feelings: not the disciples, not the crowds, not the Jerusalem leaders, not his own mother, brothers, and sisters,² not me and not you. And when he’s finished teaching, he often adds a tag at the end, and it’s this, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,”³ and since everyone has an ear on each side of their head, his words are for everyone, whether hearing him live then or reading his words now. From the risen Jesus through the Holy Spirit in a vision to the prophet John exiled on Patmos the word comes to believers under pressure in seven cities, and as each is read, all seven listen. They are in this together.

Jesus is truth and power in service of divine love. He speaks and is not silent. He speaks the truth and nothing else. He speaks with love, no other motive, and the Father and the Spirit back his act with power, but particularly on the second day after his death in a great bodily resurrection.⁴

² Mark 3:31-35.

³ Matthew 11:15, Mark 4:9, Luke 8:8, 14:35.

⁴ Luke 4:1, “And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit....” 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me....” 5:17, “... and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.”

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And if you asked me today what Jesus' bodily resurrection means, among other things I'd tell you that the Lord Jesus is fully alive in a realm just beyond sight in the control room of the universe— heaven, and if alive then available. He's still speaking for those with ears to hear, and so about sixty or so years after his cross and resurrection, seven churches in Asia Minor— modern Turkey— receive surprise letters from him through the prophet John. And if Jesus was still speaking then, six decades after the great events, he's speaking now. You know it's him when the voice stops you cold, when it matches the portrait of him you find in Scripture, when it calls you to change your mind or actions, when it's risky, and when it's marinated in the kind of love that sets your insides quaking. And when he speaks, you have some time to consider what obedience means, and either way there are consequences, the outcomes of obedience or the outcomes of disobedience. And if you say *No* or *Later* or *I'm not interested* or *The cost is too high*, it may be a while before you hear again, if at all.

I believe The United Methodist Church is at a crossroads at the coming General Conference. If we do not refocus on the living person of Jesus— not just as a noble example but as a living Lord, if we do not recover our core of basic doctrines, and if we do not recover our ethical edge— particularly our distinctively biblical sexual ethic, if we continue to tolerate of things we should not tolerate without consistent discipline, and if we do not listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches, we deserve what comes. It's simply not enough just to be busy with good works and projects as we so love to do; we must re-embrace the deeps truths of the faith and the person in whom they are grounded, a living Jesus who speak to a people who are eager to listen and follow him as an alternative to the world around us.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Before us this morning is an urban church at the end of the first century, the church in Thyatira, the fourth of the seven being addressed, and it's in trouble. First Methodist of Thyatira has been *sleeping around* with the world so that some bug from outside has come inside their bounds to compromise the church immune system and open the community to infection. They have the spiritual equivalent of HIV/AIDS. Churches— as you well know— can become theologically, spiritually, and morally sick, and the medical analogy is a good one. The good news is we have a Great Physician, the risen Lord, who knows the problem and the therapy. He cared enough to intervene by sending a diagnosis and prescription to each church, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

And now I want to introduce you to someone I recently met:

"Greetings, visitors. My name is Lactanius, and I am one of the *aediles* of Thyatira; think of me as a mayor. Of the seven cities you're visiting, many think ours is least. We lie on the road between Pergamum and Sardis to the south and on the banks of the Lycus River. We are also a garrison town on the eastern frontier of the Roman province of Asia. Our job is to protect the major trade route. We worship the god Tyrimos, similar to the Greek god Apollo. He is pictured on horseback on our coins, armed with battle axe, a son of Zeus. On the other face of our coins is the Roman Emperor, also a Son of God and thus Son of Zeus. So when you Christians claim, as I have heard, that your Jewish crucified Savior Jesus is *Son of God*, we have a real problem because it's an overt challenge to both our religious and political systems as a whole. You claim that the agent of God is not Apollo and the Emperor, but your Jesus the Jew, and it undermines our entire social structure, and we cannot tolerate that!

We are a commercial center with more trade guilds than any other Asian city: wool-workers, garment-makers, tanners, leather-workers, potters, bakers, slave-dealers, bronze-smiths and iron-workers with their blazing furnaces. Each group honors its own male or female deity as well as to the over-arching official religion of the Empire which involves rituals of loyalty to the Emperor as divine. Our guilds are more than your trade unions. They provide the basic social structure of our city, each with its own personality, and our meetings involve the worship of our patron deity and sometimes drunkenness and sexual dalliance associated with the meetings. The meat eaten at our gatherings is first offered to one of the gods or goddesses in their respective temple before it becomes a banquet for our co-workers and invitees. To survive in Thyatira, you need to be a member of some trade group. It's the way things are in our world. Religion and business and civic life and partying all go together, and to stand outside our system is a hard place to survive.

There is a group of your fellows in our city. Kind people they are, always serving and enduring our ridicule because many of them no longer participate in our civic life in the temples. Something about it being idolatry since theirs is the only true God. But we hear there is division within the church and a fight brewing on just this issue of

temples and morality. Something about a woman prophetess nicknamed *Jezebel* after one of the ancient Hebrew's more wicked queens.⁵

If my memory serves me well, she was a Phoenician married to the weak king Ahab and led him away from the Jewish God Yahweh to the worship of the Baals, the fertility deities of Canaan. He changed the religion of Israel in her favor, and in order to accommodate her had a temple of Baal built in his capital, Samaria. She gave Elijah quite a fit and killed as many of your prophets as she could. Is that not correct? This must be some local woman to deserve such an infamous association! How did she find a following among you? Is it not her teaching, as I have heard, that you can be loyal to your one God while at the same time enjoyed the benefits of our many gods and goddesses in the temples with their wine, women, and song? Are your own people becoming disloyal? We call it accommodation; you call it treason; which is it? But as mayor I will leave the theology and internal squabbles to you. I am a practical man of the world. Oh, and before I forget. Lydia, one of your people in Philippi across the Sea, a seller of purple goods, was from our city some forty years ago. Quite a fashionable woman with a household of her own.⁶ I am told such women find the new faith attractive because of the respect they have in your circles and the freedom to exercise religious leadership and prophesy."⁷ Is that how the one you now call Jezebel found such a following?

So to the church in Thyatira comes a letter bundled with six others. And

⁵ See the article "Jezebel" in Geoffrey Bromily, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁶ Acts 16:11-15.

⁷ This first person accounted is adapted from James L. Blevins, *Revelation as Drama* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1984), 37-38, and supplemented with other historical and cultural data from Sean Kealy, *the Apocalypse of John* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1987), 92; Robert Mulholland, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 112; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 61-62; Ben Witherington, *Revelation* (Cambridge, England: CUP, 2003), 104-105; N.T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2011), 23-28; Mitchell Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 63-65.

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whether the angel of the church is understood to be a heavenly being assigned to the church or merely a church leader, the address is formal, like an imperial edict, "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write...."⁸

From John's vision of the risen Lord in chapter 1, two items are selected for emphasis in the second half of verse 18. Of all that Jesus is, here are the two aspects the church in Thyatira most needs to remember:

- 1) that the risen Jesus sees to the core of who they are: he has eyes like flames of fire; and
- 2) that he is not going to move: his feet are like gleaming bronze. We can't hide from his gaze, and if anybody is to move, it's going to be us!

There is always more to Christ than any one church can process at any moment in its life. My best guess is that Main Street needs to be reminded that Jesus has *ears*, that he hears and responds to the prayers of his people, and that he has a *heart*, that he yearns for the people in our neighborhood and city to know his love and power. There are people within blocks of us who don't know we exist. Were we to receive such a telegram, it would most likely call us to prayer and to local evangelism.

There was much to praise in the Thyatiran church. It was a church with a good heart, love and faith towards God, service and patient endurance with people. The risen Lord twice highlights their works and praises their virtues. They were a lot like this church. Not only were the fruits of the Spirit in place, their *later works exceed the first*. The problem was not with their heart which was full of love and faith; nor was the problem with their hands or feet which were busy serving; it was with their head. Their ability to differentiate between truth and falsehood was not highly developed. They were not a discerning or courageous church. Perhaps, like many good Methodist laity, they thought to themselves, "If we're just good people, the problems will take care of themselves. We don't like controversy." So the pastors stroke the people and become professional nice-guys. Everyone spends so much time keeping the peace and keeping the machinery running and well-oiled that no one cares about the truth any longer. It's so comfortable. This is the United Methodist Church, the church I love. We are the church in Thyatira; they are our ancient twin.

⁸ On the use of the edict form as a deliberate political parody by opponents, see Nestor Paulo Friedrich, "Adapt or Resist? A Socio-Political Reading of Revelation 2:18-29," *JSNT* 25.2 (2002), 186-188.

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But Christ had a bone to pick with the church in Thyatira, particularly its leaders; they tolerated what ought not be tolerated. “But I have this against you,” he says, “that you *tolerate* the women Jezebel who promotes immorality and says that hanging out in the temples really doesn’t matter.”

There was a self-appointed prophetess and teacher in the church now code-named *Jezebel*, and it was the risen Jesus who named her as such, which is not a compliment! Everyone knew her real name, but the moniker *Jezebel* likened her to the wicked queen of old. She had a following; she was popular. There was a spirit about her, so sophisticated and knowledgeable, so bold and brassy. She told the people what they wanted to hear. That you could go to the meetings of your trade guild in a pagan temple, eat meat offered to idols, participate in the rituals– even if they involved dalliance– and still be a follower of Jesus Christ.

It was a social and economic argument rooted in a wrong understanding of the human person, that we are two separate parts, body and soul or spirit, and if Jesus is interested only in the inner man or woman, then where the body goes or what it does is immaterial. But the true understanding is that what you do with the body you do with the self; the entire self belongs to Jesus Christ and should be used in loyalty to him, even if it costs you friends, social outlets, even your trade.

After all, since our involvement with Christ is purely spiritual, what we do with the body doesn't really matter does it? How convenient. Have your cake and eat it too. You can compromise with the world and stay faithful to Christ. In fact, she apparently had a teaching that Christians who did such things were demonstrating a new spiritual freedom by entering "the deep things of Satan" by going into his very lair. To overcome evil, she taught, you must first participate in it and see that it’s not a threat. Jezebel called the church to conform to the culture rather than calling the church to stand over against the culture with a call to transformation.⁹ Today, she’d be on afternoon TV promoting a more liberating form of the Christian faith, nothing so narrow as insisting on one God and the virtue of channeling your vital energies into a monogamous, faithful marriage. Slogans abound, “Enjoy yourself. When in Rome.... What happens in the temples stays in the temples....”

Not everyone in the church believed the new thing. Some did because it as easy, and they were her spiritual children. But others had not learned "the deep things

⁹ The classic treatment of this issue remain H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ And Culture* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1951).

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of Satan," and Christ laid no extra burden on this faithful group. They were to keep-on-keeping-on. They were to cling to the truth they knew and stay faithful. The problem was with the middle group of leaders who preached tolerance above truth.

The reason I am part of The Confessing Movement calling for doctrinal renewal in our church is that I think truth matters and that unless someone starts waving a big, red flag, our church is going to lose its moorings, as is now happening to other old-line Protestant denominations in our country. The classic, catholic faith of the church, found in Scripture and summarized in the great creeds, is a treasure to be studied, guarded, interpreted, and passed on. And frankly, we pastors have not done a good job. We tell our people to be good, work hard and keep giving, but we don't teach them how to hold fast to truth and reject error.

What is particularly interesting is the patience of the Lord in this matter. Appointing yourself a prophetess and leading people astray is bad enough, the fact being that if you truly are a prophet, you don't have to tell anyone; they will know! But that is not the point of the judgment announced in verses 21 and 22. It was that Jezebel refused to repent after being warned and given time, "I (Jesus) gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality."

That is why the wrath of God comes, not so much on our sin or foolishness but on our stubbornness, our refusal to turn back once warned. It has now been named before all in a letter; judgment is about to fall if nothing changes. Jezebel will be stuck ill and confined to the bed of her sin— a symbolic justice since God's penalty fits the crime. Her bed of immorality becomes her couch of pain. Her followers will be thrown into disarray; and if they do not repent will die with her, "...and I will strike her children dead." Strong medicine! Christ is waging internal warfare on his church. Only in heaven will we see the full extent of this across history, but for now it's hidden. God doesn't give us a list of who he takes out ahead of time. There is an end to the Lord's patience; he will not endure dangerous foolishness forever. We all know the church can become corrupted; all you have to do is read a little church history or look in your own heart. What we may miss is that the church will also be preserved through time as a faithful witness and that the Lord reserves the right to raise up new movements, as he once did with us.

Now sickness most often comes from living in a fallen world where chaos has corrupted everything even down to the genetic level; it may also come from our own bad habits; it may also— on specific occasions— come from the Lord. Jezebel would never have been a problem had the church not been so overly tolerant and

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accommodating. Perhaps that's a risk of being a loving, patient, kind, busy church like this one. You lead with your heart and become sloppy in your theology and ethics. You forget we live on a battleground with an enemy who prowls around looking for vulnerable people to exploit.¹⁰ You forget the fight and go soft.

The poison of Jezebel, was being injected into the life blood of the church in Thyatira while the leadership sat idly by in some anesthetic fog of hyper-tolerance. They should have taken action early on to isolate her influence, but they did nothing but compromise. The preacher Henry Ward Beecher once wrote:

"A man that does not know how to be angry does not know how to be good. A man that does not know how to be shaken to his heart's core with indignation over things evil is either a fungus or a wicked man."¹¹

Only twice in forty years have I ever been forced to remove members from church leadership, both were men, and both were chronic adulterers who even after private appeal and counseling refused to change their ways. But when they were removed, it had an effect on the whole church. It served as a warning to the whole church, verse 23: "*And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.*"

I received criticism then. After all, what right did I have to tell someone what they could and couldn't do? Isn't this a free country? Yes, but ours is not a free church; we even have official lists of what is not tolerated.¹² We live under a covenant of church membership vows, and the covenant has requirements both for belief and behavior. It was agonizing for me to deal with these two men. I spent much time searching my own soul. At one time they were both men I trusted. But when I followed through because it was my job, there was a new sense of the fear of God in me and a sense that the church was worth protecting.

We all have a Christian duty to watch over one another in love, not to meddle and snoop but to be on the watch. But as pastor I have a responsibility none of you have, and that is to keep the fences mended and to watch over the boundaries between us and the culture. I am not a moral policeman, not a snoop. Most of peoples' lives

¹⁰ 1 Peter 5:8-11.

¹¹ Green, *Illustrations*, 20.

¹² *The Book of Discipline 2012*, paragraph 2702.

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is none of my business. I would much rather dwell in the wonderful virtues of love and faith and service and patience found in verse 19 than the messy confrontation and discipline of verses 20 through 25. But I also will not allow this church to be infected by gross public sin or doctrinal error as long as I'm pastor. I believe in a generous Christian orthodoxy, and I have a high view of Scriptural inspiration. I hope to be loved, but I will not let my natural desire to be liked overcome my responsibility to hold us accountable to the demands of this great faith. An overly tolerant church, a church that can't say No to anything and defend its decisions will inevitably say Yes to everything and end up as a great big nothing. We must know the truth and love the truth and sing the truth and defend the truth for the sake of our own salvation, for the sake of generations yet unborn, for the sake of the saints who cheer us on from heaven, and for the sake of the world for which Christ died, which has a right to receive or reject the faith in its pure form, not some cheap imitation with all the sharp edges knocked off, sugar-coated and dumbed-down for popular consumption.

I take it as a great comfort that the risen Lord does not hold himself away from his church but continues to speak, to praise, to warn, to engage, to be patient, to judge, and finally to reward. Our job is not to run the church in the Lord's absence but to continue to listen. The question is not, "Is he speaking?" but "Are we listening?" As he said, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Remember, there were at least three groups in the Thyatiran church. Jezebel and her followers were the immediate issue. They were the source of the doctrinal error and ethical disease, of bad belief and worse behavior. They wanted to be Christians and live in Vegas. Wanted to be Christians and still smoke weed. Wanted to be Christians and still shack-up. Wanted to be Christians and still be seen at all the old places. Wanted to be Christians and continue to dabble with other gods because of the business contacts it opened up through the trade guilds. Wanted to be Christians but have no differences from the pagan world around them. Their passion was not to follow Jesus but to fit in to the culture and its whims. Sound familiar?

But it was the hyper-toleration of church leaders that allowed Jezebel a forum in the first place. After a period of warning and patience, they were about to be judged. Sickbed, great tribulation, and death were ahead unless they underwent a radical change of heart, head, and lifestyle. The warning is clear. Those who corrupt the church will be corrupted by God.¹³ When it comes to his bride, Jesus plays rough.

¹³ 1 Cor. 3:16-17.

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The second group in the church was the faithful remnant. There are such saints in every church. They are both orthodox in their beliefs and ethical in their behavior, full of love and faith and service and perseverance. Christ's call to them was to *hunker down and hold on*. No extra burden is placed on them, just stay at it. They were the salt of the earth and the heart of the church. It was hard, but they were not to abandon the church to Jezebel and her kind. God knows who they are, and whether their churches ever experience depth renewal in their lifetimes, they will be amply rewarded for keeping the light of faith lit when no one else much cared.

The third group, and perhaps the most culpable, were the leaders who knew Jezebel was out of bounds and did nothing. For them appeasement was the strategy. They are the Neville Chamberlain's of the church, who think they can do honorable business with error and live in peace. They speak of a middle way when there is none. Let every local church vote on whether it wants to be a Jezebel Church or not? Are you kidding me? But that will soon be before the General Conference. Am I overstating the case threat? I don't think so. It was this group, and not just Jezebel, that the risen Jesus had something against.

CONCLUSION

The story is told of an inventive African tribe that learned a new way to catch ducks. Catching the agile, wary birds would be a feat indeed, so they formulated a plan.

The tribesmen decided to go upstream, place a pumpkin in the river, and let it slowly float down into a flock of ducks. At first, the cautious fowl would quack in alarm and fly away. After all, it wasn't ordinary for pumpkins to float down the river! But the tribesmen would soon float another pumpkin into the re-gathered ducks. Again they'd scatter, only to return after the strange orange sphere passed. Again, the hungry hunters floated another pumpkin. This time the ducks stayed put, and with each successive passing of a pumpkin, the ducks become more comfortable, until they finally accepted floating pumpkins as a normal part of river life.

When the natives saw the pumpkins no longer bothered the ducks, they hollowed out pumpkins, put them over their heads, and walked into the river. Meandering into the midst of the tolerant fowl, they pulled them down one at a time. For dinner that night? Roast duck!¹⁴ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

¹⁴ Wayne Cordeiro, *Jesus: Pure and Simple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany/Baker, 2012), 128-129
