

Tuesday Teaching Series  
Series #13: The Seven Churches of Asia in Revelation  
Thyatira: The Adulterous Church (Revelation 2:18-29)  
Tuesday, May 8, 2018

Read Revelation 2:18-29 aloud from 2 translations and *The Message*.

### **Historical Information about Thyatira**

Thyatira, seated on the river Hermus, is 38 miles from Pergamos and 32 miles from Sardis. The city was located in the northern part of Lydia of the Roman province of Asia, and bordered Mysia on the north and Lydia on the south. It is conjectured that the name Thyatira is derived from the Greek word *‘thugater’* which means ‘daughter.’ It is said to have gotten its name in 290 B.C. in honor of the birth of King Seleucus I Nicator’s daughter. Thyatira’s modern name is Akhisar (Akhissar), which means a ‘white colored castle.’

Thyatira was a prosperous trading town that was an important location on the Roman road from Pergamos to Laodicea. It also hosted a major cult of the pagan god Apollo (son of Zeus). The city was famous for its dyeing and was a center of the indigo trade. Its trade guilds, for which it was well known, were more organized and in far greater numbers than in any other ancient Asia Minor city. Among its ruins were found inscriptions relating to a guild of dyers. Evidence suggests these artisans made use of the madder-root for making purple-colored dyes.

Every artisan in Thyatira belonged to a guild. Guilds were incorporated organizations that could own property in its own name and enter into contracts for construction projects. As such, they wielded a significant amount of influence. Two of the most powerful guilds were those of the coppersmiths and the dyers.

During his second missionary journey (Acts 16:13-15) St. Paul traveled to Philippi. On a Sabbath day, he met a woman named Lydia, from Thyatira, who was praying near a river. Lydia was a seller of purple (either of the dye or cloth dyed in this color). She listened to Paul’s preaching and became so convicted in God’s way of life that she, along with her entire household, were baptized (likely on the Day of Pentecost). It is likely Lydia, when she traveled back to Thyatira, helped spread the gospel throughout the city.



## **The Message to the Church at Thyatira**

For some people today tolerance is the only real virtue and intolerance the only vice. The message to Thyatira goes against the grain of modernity by setting limits to tolerance. The main criticism of the *angel* of Thyatira is that he has tolerated something—and someone—that should not be tolerated (v. 20). At stake was the question of assimilation: to what extent should Christians conform to the prevailing culture for the sake of economic survival or social acceptance?

The situation at Thyatira was similar to that at Pergamum, except that the false teaching (and consequently the name calling) centers on a single individual. This is unique in the seven messages. Antipas, the only other named individual (2:13), was singled out for praise rather than scorn or condemnation. *That woman Jezebel*, by contrast (v. 20), is given not her real name but a nickname, after Israel's idolatrous queen (1 Kings 16:31; 21:25) whose terrible fate at the hands of Jehu was prophesied by Elijah (1 Kings 21:23; 2 Kings 9:30-37). The power and influence of this *Jezebel*, a self-styled prophetess at Thyatira, must be viewed in light of three facts: (1) women prophesied freely in early Christianity (see, for example, Acts 2:17; 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5); (2) women often played major roles as priestesses in contemporary Roman and Eastern cults in Asia Minor; (3) the Christian Montanist movement in the same region a century later assigned conspicuous leadership roles to two prophetesses—Priscilla and Maximilla (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.14-19).

Clearly, Jezebel is not a true prophetess in the eyes of the risen Jesus. There is no reason to think that the book of Revelation has anything against “prophetesses,” any more than against “apostles” or “Jews.” But as with those who claimed to be apostles at Ephesus (2:2) or Jews at Smyrna (2:9), the implication is that Jezebel is a liar. Like the Nicolaitans at Pergamum, she was urging *sexual immorality and the eating of foods sacrificed to idols* (v. 20; compare 2:14), in other words, the violation of the decree of the Jerusalem Council. A possible further reference to that decree appears in words directed to *the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching*, when Jesus says, *I will not impose any other burden on you* (v. 24; compare Acts 15:28, “not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements”).

The risen Jesus makes no distinction between prophets who condone idolatry and immorality and those who practice such things. He compares Jezebel to a prostitute, like the prostitute “Babylon” in chapters 17-18. She has had time to repent, but has not done so. Her punishment is to be put to bed (v. 22), “a bed of sickness in contrast with the bed of adultery” (Beckwith 1922:467). Her followers at Thyatira (*those who commit adultery with her*) still have time to repent, but are similarly in danger of intense, though unspecified, sufferings (v. 22). As for her *children*, that is, anyone who perpetuates her teaching, they will be struck dead by a plague (v. 23). Like Jezebel of old, her name and her influence will disappear from the earth (compare 2 Kings 10:1-28).

Jezebel seems to have justified her freedom from traditional restraints by appealing to the spiritual maturity of herself and her followers. She may even have quoted Paul to the effect that “God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” and “the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10). Possibly with Paul's statement in

view, the risen Jesus announces, not just to Thyatira but to *all the churches* (v. 23), that *I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds*, adding that the “deep things” of such groups as this are not the profound truths of God, but the *deep secrets* of Satan himself (v. 24).

The angel at Thyatira is, if anything, even less implicated with the false prophets than was the angel at Pergamum. He is not charged with any of Jezebel’s crimes, only with excessive tolerance of her and her partisans. In contrast to the angel at Ephesus (2:4-5), he is commended for *doing more than you did at first* (v. 19). He is not, like the angel at Pergamum, told to “repent,” but simply to *hold on to what you have until I come* (v. 25). Consequently, the “coming” of the risen one is not a threat (as in 2:16), but a hope. This suggests that Jezebel and her clan may not have been an actual part of the congregation, but a separate community trying to entice away its members. As for the angel, the words of praise at the beginning of the message (*I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance*, v. 19) are still in effect.

### **What was Montanism?**

Montanism, also called Cataphrygian heresy, or New Prophecy was a heretical movement founded by the prophet Montanus that arose in the Christian church in Phrygia, Asia Minor, in the 2nd century. Subsequently it flourished in the West, principally in Carthage under the leadership of Tertullian in the 3rd century. It had almost died out in the 5th and 6th centuries, although some evidence indicates that it survived into the 9th century.

According to the known history, Montanus, a recent Christian convert, appeared at Ardabau, a small village in Phrygia, about 156. He fell into a trance and began to “prophecy under the influence of the Spirit.” He was soon joined by two young women, Prisca (Priscilla) and Maximilla, who also began to prophecy. The movement spread throughout Asia Minor.

The essential principle of Montanism was that the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, whom Jesus had promised in the Gospel According to John, was manifesting himself to the world through Montanus and the prophets and prophetesses associated with him. This did not seem at first to deny the doctrines of the church or to attack the authority of the bishops. But it soon became clear that the claim of Montanus to have the final revelation of the Holy Spirit implied that something could be added to the teaching of Christ and the Apostles and that, therefore, the church had to accept a fuller revelation.

Another important aspect of Montanism was the expectation of the Second Coming of Christ, which was believed to be imminent. This belief was not confined to Montanists, but with them it took a special form that gave their activities the character of a popular revival. They believed the heavenly Jerusalem was soon to descend on the Earth in a plain between the two villages of Pepuza and Tymion in Phrygia. The prophets and many followers went there, and many Christian

communities were almost abandoned. In addition to prophetic enthusiasm, Montanism taught a legalistic moral rigorism. The time of fasting was lengthened, followers were forbidden to flee from martyrdom, marriage was discouraged, and second marriages were prohibited.

When it became obvious that the Montanist doctrine was an attack on the Catholic faith, the bishops of Asia Minor gathered in synods and finally excommunicated the Montanists, probably c. 177. Montanism then became a separate sect with its seat of government at Pepuza. It maintained the ordinary Christian ministry but imposed on it higher orders of patriarchs and associates who were probably successors of the first Montanist prophets. It continued in the East until severe legislation against Montanism by Emperor Justinian I (reigned 527–565) essentially destroyed it, but some remnants evidently survived into the 9th century.

### **Other Interpretations of the Letter to the Church at Thyatira**

Historicist: The Church at Thyatira represents the Church from AD 538 – 1517, considered the “Papal Period,” which was dominated by Mariology. Like Jezebel in the OT who led Israel into idolatry by worshipping the mother goddess Asharoth, the Queen of Heaven (Jeremiah 44:17-18, 25), the papacy led the church into the idolatrous worship of Mary, mother of Jesus, instead of only Jesus. Verse 23 refers to the Black Plague, ca. 1347.

Idealist: The Church at Thyatira has allowed an influential woman, call her Jezebel, into compromise with the ways of the world, including sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to other gods (idols). This will eventually lead to the demise of the seven churches in Asia Minor. Despite all this, keep doing the things you’re doing right.

### **Questions to Ponder**

1. How does the letter to the Church at Thyatira apply to life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?
  - a. Who are the Jezebels and who are the idols?
2. What might it be saying to today’s church?

### **Resources**

“The Seven Churches of Revelation: Thyatira,” <http://www.biblestudy.org/biblepic/churches-of-revelation-thyatira.html>

“The Message to Thyatira,” <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Rev/Message-Thyatira>

Wilfred J. Harrington, “Message to Thyatira,” in *Sacra Pagina*, Daniel J. Harrington, ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008)

C. Marvin Pate, *Reading Revelation: A Comparison of Four Interpretive Translations of the Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009)