

IN RESPONSE - THE LETTER TO THYATIRA, PART I

by Dennis Prutow

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We come to the fourth of the seven churches. Thyatira is southeast of Pergamum about forty miles. The city was known for the roots of a plant from which red dye was manufactured.¹ It was a center of industry, commerce, affluence, trade guilds, and pagan religious practices. We recall Acts 16:14 where Paul went to a riverside in Philippi. "A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." It is possible Lydia took the gospel back to Thyatira.

Revelation 2:18, "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this." We have what I have called a memo. It is addressed *to* the church at Thyatira through her pastor. *Angel* means *messenger*. The chief messenger of God within a congregation is the pastor.

The memo is *from* the Son of God. He is described as the one with penetrating eyes who sees beyond outward appearance. He strides through history with power (Revelation 1:14-15). He does not have feet of clay (Daniel 2:33-34). He brings sure and burning judgment.

Verse 19. Christ commends the church. "I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first." The deeds of the church comport with the profession made by this body of believers. This church lives James 2:22, "You see that faith was working with his [their] works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected." The faith of members of this church was shown *mature* as they exercised "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:7).

This church also embodies James 2:24. "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." *Justified* is translated *vindicated* in Matthew 11:19, "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." The faith of persons professing Christ is *vindicated* by their works. Love, faith and service are tied together in them.

Growth and sanctification are also taking place among these believers. "Your deeds of late are greater than at first" (verse 19). Such sanctification is essential. "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

With all this commendation, Christ also indicates His displeasure with Thyatira. "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" (verse 20).

While increasing in love, faith, service and perseverance, Christians ought not to tolerate evil or heresy in the church. The name Jezebel immediately reminds us of the infamous Old Testament character. Concerning Ahab, 1 Kings 16:31 says, "It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshipped him." Jezebel exercised undue influence over Ahab and led the kingdom into deeper idolatry.

Since Jezebel was the wife of the reputed head of Israel, some commentators hold the Jezebel of Thyatira, although this is likely not her name, is the wife of the pastor.²

Because she is a prophetess, others hold this Jezebel may be a Thyatiran oracle or Sibyl.³ There are several prophetesses mentioned in Scripture. See Exodus 15:20, Miriam; Judges 4:4, Deborah; 2 Kings 22:14, Huldah; Isaiah 8:3, Isaiah's wife; and Luke 2:36, Anna. There are also evil, false prophetesses such as Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14).

In any event, this Jezebel typifies idolatry and heresy brought into the church. As Ramsey indicates, "Toleration of heresy is the characteristic of this church."⁴ He goes on to say, "The whole epistle shows how great the evil is of tol-

erating in the church any teaching which has not the manifest stamp of Christ's authority upon it, no matter what may be its apparent wisdom or speciousness or harmlessness."⁵

Tolerance is the byword of modern culture. The sin of sins is intolerance. This spirit pervades the church. Biblical Christianity is viewed as too narrow. However, the way of Christ is narrow. "The gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life" (Matthew 7:14).

Does Jezebel lead Thyatira into cultic idolatry, sensuality, and adultery? This may be the case. However, those "corrupting the church's purity and leading her members into a heinous spiritual adultery, are true Jezebels, with whatever attractions they may clothe themselves and their teachings...."⁶ These Jezebels lead men and women down the broad way. "The gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it" (Matthew 7:13). All Jezebels and all who follow her need repentance.

Verse 21. "I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality." Those who fail in the desire or inclination to repent are doomed. "For the mind set on the flesh is death" (Romans 8:6).

Verses 22-23 promise this judgment. "Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence, and 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." Christ will throw the adulterer into a *clinic*. Sickness and disease is incipient death. It is the doorway to eternal death for the unrepentant. In the end, all will acknowledge the Lordship of Christ (Philippians 2:10, Revelation 9:20-21).

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² Reid, 57.

³ Swete, 43.

⁴ Ramsey, 154.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 155.

¹ Reid, 54.

IN RESPONSE - THE LETTER TO THYATIRA, PART II

by Dennis Prutow

Christ proclaims judgment and doom upon those who follow Jezebel *and tolerate her*. The church is a mixed multitude (Exodus 12:38, Matthew 13:38). Christ therefore has words of encouragement for those in the congregation who are faithful, the rest.

Revelation 2:24, "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, as they call them, I place no other burden on you." We now glimpse into the heresy of Jezebel. It is characterized as "deep things of Satan." Some in the church disdain straightforward and objective truth. They seek esoteric, private, secret religion known only by a few. They are not content with what pertains to Christ and to salvation. They want something *deep*. Gnostic mysticism holds individuals can directly obtain such special knowledge outside of objective written revelation.

These people follow Satan rather than God. The things of God come to us through the revelation of Scripture. To walk by the Spirit means to follow the written word of God under the power of the Holy Spirit. Truth is objective not esoteric or hidden. We have no other burden than to seek out the truth of God in the word of God, in Scripture.

Satan tempts us to step outside of Scripture, to seek ultimate truth elsewhere, to consult psychics and readers. God says, "As for the person who turns to mediums and to spiritists, to play the harlot after them, I will also set My face against that person and will cut him off from among his people" (Leviticus 20:6).

What does Christ tell the faithful? "Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come" (verse 25). You have God's word and God's grace; hold fast until the end. Elsewhere Jesus promises, "The one who endures to the end, he will be saved" (Matthew 24:13). As already mentioned, we walk by the Spirit when we follow the word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what we have. To this we must hold fast at all cost.

Saul experienced the work of the Spirit upon Him (1 Samuel 10:9-11). He was changed from a shepherd to a king, as was David, but Saul was not born again.

Saul was a murderer (1 Samuel 19:9-10). "And you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:5). Scripture tells us, "the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him" (1 Samuel 16:14). David remembered well this departure of the Spirit. When he sinned with Bathsheba he feared the same egress of the Spirit. "Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:11). The best assurance we are redeemed is holding fast until Christ comes to take us in death or to take us in His glorious second coming.

Verse 26, "He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations." To overcome is to have victory. This is also the assurance we are born again. "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 John 5:4). We overcome the world when we follow the word of God and the law of God. We are enabled to do so by the Spirit. This is the way of faith.

The promise Christ gives believers comes from Psalm 2:7-9, "I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like earthenware.'" The Father promises Christ the nations, the ends of the earth. The promise is fulfilled in the Great Commission and the spread of the gospel. Note two texts. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19). "You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Believers participate in the fulfillment of this prophecy in two ways. One, they are caught up in the plan of God for the nations as they are converted and brought into His Kingdom. Two, the fulfillment advances as believers propagate the gospel in their witness and their support of the gospel in pray and in giving.

Verse 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." How does this promise come to believers? Believers rule in the world only because Christ rules.

The reign of Christ is extended as believers live and proclaim the gospel and the law of God as His rule of righteousness. Christ reigns in the church as the word of God is faithfully proclaimed and the people of God follow Him as Lord. Christ rules in the world as the church proclaims the gospel and Christ subdues the hearts of men and women to Himself. Christ also rules in the world as believers faithfully carry out His dictates and follow His word. Finally, Christ rules in the exercise of His providence.

Christ exercises His rule in both blessing and judgment. "What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory" (Romans 9:22-23). Within the church, Christ exercises His reign as Saul like Jezebels are disciplined. Clay pots may experience the blows of Christ's strong scepter. If, under church discipline, they refuse to repent, they are headed for eternal destruction. They are broken.

Verse 28. "And I will give him the morning star." Those who live under and exercise Christ's rule receive the ultimate reward. The *morning star* is Christ (Revelation 22:16). Each tribe of Israel except one received a prescribed portion of the promised land. "Levi does not have a portion or inheritance with his brothers; the Lord is his inheritance" (Deuteronomy 10:9). Believers stand in the place of Levi. As David so eloquently put it, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:26).

Verse 29. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." We must listen with spiritual ears as well as physical ears.

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IN RESPONSE - THE LETTER TO SARDIS

by Dennis Prutow

We examined the letters to the three churches located in seaport communities along the Aegean, Ephesus in the south, Smyrna some thirty-five miles north, and Pergamum some fifty-five miles further northeast. We moved inland about forty-five miles southeast to Thyatira.

Sardis is about thirty miles southeast of Thyatira. "For many ages this city had been celebrated for its wealth and magnificence. It was one of the most beautifully situated cities in all Asia."¹ "The city was addicted to a life of ease..."² "The inhabitants of Sardis, we are told, were held in ill repute, even among the ancients, for their voluptuous habits of life."³ "Like Thyatira, it was famous for its woolen manufacture and dyeing industry."⁴

Revelation 3:1, "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.'" Here is the most grave indictment made by Christ against the churches. On one side, this church has a name that it is alive.

We can make two points. "The members of the church in Sardis professed to be Christians, but they were in a state of sin, they were not Christians, their profession was but a name."⁵ How often this proves to be the case. A profession of faith does not guarantee actual saving faith is resident within the heart (Matthew 7:22, 25:11).

But there is more to the indictment than the lives of individuals within the church. "The members of the church in Sardis had a name and a reputation for piety through all that region of country; they were celebrated as a model church; men pointed to them as an example in the management of church affairs, and in all the externals of religion..."⁶

"In all that man could see, this may have been a model church. The Lord does

not charge her with any special sin. Her liberality and charity, her adherence to sound doctrine and morals, her observance of ordinances were all such that the mere superficial observer could see nothing to censure, but very much to praise."⁷

Yet, our Lord says to this church, "You are dead." This church is spiritually dead. There is formal and lifeless religion. "This is a most sad and perilous condition for any church to be found in; and yet it is a very frequent state of churches outwardly prosperous."⁸ Can this take place in orthodox Bible believing churches? Yes. There is such a thing as dead orthodoxy.

The exhortation to Sardis is simple and straightforward. Verse 2, "Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God." The church that is dead, that is asleep, needs awakening. The words of Paul in Ephesians 5:14 apply. "Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

How does awakening come?

It usually requires, not only the reiterated warnings of God's word to be sounded in the ears, but generally some startling, crushing, humbling providences, to strike the stupid soul, and arouse it from its dreams of carnal security and worldly ease. Sickness, worldly losses, bitter disappointments, sore bereavements, or what is still worse, being left to fall into some open sin, are, one or more of them, the means used to awaken such, if there be any salvation for them.⁹

The command to wake up must accompany God's providences.

Certain things remain in the church in Sardis. The ordinances are present, the word, the sacraments, and prayer. Strengthen the use of these outward ordinances. The use of these means of grace are not perfect; they are incomplete. So often men and women and pastors do not realize the design of God to work in power through these means of

grace. In addition, we rarely see God's priority to use His visible church as an engine of mercy in the world. The church is, after all, the special dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22-23). We must therefore strengthen what remains.

Verse 3, "So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you." Literally, the text reads, "Remember *how* you received and heard..." Jesus reminds us *how* the word is often received. "The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy" (Matthew 13:20). Did you receive the word with great joy upon your conversion? Was it a true and vital conversion based on the power of God (2 Corinthians 2:5)? Or are you too a rocky ground Christian having only temporary faith? David sinned gravely. He repented. David had saving faith. If you do not repent, judgment is sure. Christ will come as a thief and you will lose all.

Verse 4, "But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy." A few people in the church are faithful and not simply formal in their relationship with God. They have the white robes of imputed righteousness. They are worthy to enter God's presence because of the work of Christ on their behalf.

Verse 5, "He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels." The one who overcomes has vital faith (1 John 5:4). Reference to names not being erased assures us of the permanence of names in the Book of Life. Christ promises, "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32). Are we listening? Verse 6, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

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¹ Ramsey, 163.

² Wilson, 41.

³ Reid, 62

⁴ Swete, 48.

⁵ Reid, 63.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ramsey, 164.

⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁹ Ibid., 167-168.

IN RESPONSE - THE LETTER TO PHILADELPHIA, PART I

by Dennis Prutow

About thirty miles south and east of Sardis, Philadelphia was a city frequently smitten by earthquakes. The church there was likely small. Only two of the churches among seven receive no censure, Smyrna and Philadelphia.

It is of some interest that the greater part of the visible church is worthy of condemnation. We dare not consider our own congregations to be above the common lot, above reproach. Christ knows our deeds and our hearts. On the other hand, we ought to strive to correct our deficiencies, as seen in five of the churches, and at the same time seek to emulate Smyrna and Philadelphia.

Revelation 3:7, "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this." The *key of David* refers to the sovereign work of Christ. Matthew Henry rehearses the formidable nature of Christ's sovereignty over us.

He opens a door of opportunity to his churches; he opens a door of utterance to his ministers; he opens a door of entrance, opens the heart; he opens a door of admission to the visible church, laying down the terms of communion; and he opens the door to the church triumphant, according to the terms of salvation fixed by him.... When he pleases, he shuts the door of opportunity and the door of utterance, and leaves obstinate sinners shut up in the hardness of their hearts; he shuts the door of church fellowship against unbelievers and profane persons; and he shuts the door of heaven against the foolish virgins who have slept away their day of grace, and against the workers of iniquity, how vain and confident soever they may be.¹

Christ commits the keys of the kingdom to His church. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). This is a great work. The promise to Philadelphia is that

there is a door of service and ministry open to her. Verse 8, "I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name." This is a great promise.

Paul pleads for prayer "that God will open up to us a door for the word" (Colossians 4:3). He reports "a wide door for effective service has opened to me" (1 Corinthians 16:9). And again, "When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). Philadelphia has an open door for service and ministry to advance the gospel.

The church may be small. There may be little power from a worldly perspective. Imagine the difference between Philadelphia and Sardis. The latter church had made a name for herself that she was a lively, active, ministering congregation, palpably blessed. But Christ said she was dead. Philadelphia, on the other hand, was a small struggling work, insignificant and obviously lacking in blessing from a worldly perspective. Christ says the door of ministry for the gospel is open to her.

Verse 9, "Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you." So wide is the door open for ministry and service that the tables will be turned on the local religious establishment. The *synagogue of Satan* is a dwelling place of the evil one. It may manifest in different ways.

On one hand, the Jewish people saw themselves as chosen of God. They rejected the Messiah of God, Jesus Christ. They were not true Jews at all. Paul draws the line clearly. "For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3). He adds, "He is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God." On the other hand, professing

Christians often reject the Christ of the Bible. The Westminster Confession says, "The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan" (25:5).

Christ promises the Philadelphia Christians that both Jew and Gentile who disdain them will be constrained to worship before them. This may come about in two ways. Christ may exercise His rule and open their hearts to respond to the gospel proclaimed by these Christians. A door appears to be open by Christ for this. Or these persons will see Christ's love for the saints of Philadelphia on the day of judgment from outside the church. They will then be forced to bow before Christ (Philippians 2:10). God will display His love for His people one way or the other.

Verse 10, "Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth." A small faithful band of Christians can and often does have profound witness. Christ promises that, as testing and persecution comes, these believers will be saved *through* the trials (1 Corinthians 10:13). The past keeping of the word of patience bodes well for future patient endurance. A reservoir of grace is found in the midst of testing. "If when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God" (1 Peter 2:20). The word translated *favor* is the word *grace*. If you have *favor* with God, you have *grace* from God. God's grace manifests most fully in our weakness.

This is an aspect of Christianity many moderns miss. Paul gives us the same testimony (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). The synagogue of Satan batters and buffets the saints in Philadelphia. We may receive the same treatment. Christ promises grace. We must persevere. Verse 11, "I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown."

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¹ Matthew Henry, 6:1133.