

[Slide 1] Expediency or Principle?

As we work through Revelation 2-3, it would be good to be reminded of what was said in the beginning of the book, in verse 4, “...*To the seven churches in the province of Asia...*” [Slide 2] Obviously, symbols are important in Revelation. The number seven denotes completeness and perfection. While they are referred to as “the” seven churches, we know that there were many others, including Colossae. Several important cities in Asia Minor were not included. If you were to travel to each church in order mentioned, you would have basically traversed a circle.

Somehow there is a sense of completeness about this list. Everything that Christ needs to say to the churches, even the churches of today, is here. If we understand the letters correctly, we can be confident of knowing everything we need to know.

So today we will look at the church from Thyatira. Read with me in *Revelation 2:18-28*. [Slide 3]

The choice that was being made everyday in Thyatira was that either expediency or principle. [Slide 4] Expediency always has to do with easing our circumstances. Principle has to do with answering our consciences. And anyone who thinks they have settled this for a lifetime, a question never to be revisited, is mostly likely deluding themselves.

Let's take an everyday example. I am coming home from work a little late. I know that eating fast food is not really that good for me. I believe in the principle of healthy eating habits. But it's late. I haven't gone to the grocery store in a while and I'm not sure what I have in the frig. What do I do? If I pull into Taco Bell, I have chosen expediency over principle. Now we understand it a little better, I think.

As they struggled with the question on higher, more important levels than diet, and as we do also, it is good to be reminded of who Jesus Christ really is. Here is the image He gave to this church: ... *The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this: “I know your deeds...”* (vv.18-19) [Slide 5] His eyes and His feet are mentioned. First of all, His eyes. These are not dead, lifeless eyes, bored and uninterested in what is going on. He knows that is going on. He is aware.

Not only does He see with penetrating eyes, He has strong feet with which to take a stand. The church would be called upon to take a stand, to show strength of character and resolve of will. Both the fire and the burnished bronze were images that citizens of Thyatira were familiar with because of their life in an industrial kind of city. That illustrates how we can understand what Christ is saying to this church better if we understand a little background to the city of Thyatira.

[Slide 6] Thyatira:

The problem is that history doesn't tell us a lot about Thyatira. It was not a particularly important city. It was the smallest city yet Christ had more to say to this church than any of the

others. It may have been insignificant to the world but it wasn't insignificant to God. Culture may not have had anything to say about them or them but Christ did.

At one time, it had served as a military outpost but those days had passed by the first century AD. Around this time, its prosperity was beginning to rise. The wealth that was here was new wealth. Because it was located on a major shipping route, it became an industrialized city. It was not a city of culture. It was a blue collar town.

What history is available tells us that there was an unusual amount of trade guilds in Thyatira, more than any other city in Asia Minor. It was a union town. If you wanted to work in a trade there—and many opportunities like that existed—you had to belong to that particular trade's guild. Each guild had its own god to be worshipped. And it was hard to work in a trade apart from being in the guild.

There was financial support to be given to the guild and participation at the feasts. Most of the meat that was leftover from the offering to the god was served at the feast, along with wine. The end of the evening usually resulted in sexual debauchery. We see all of this addressed in Christ's words. This was Thyatira. How were the believers supposed to deal with this? Enter a prophetess by the name of Jezebel.

[Slide 7] Jezebel:

It is doubtful this was actually her name. Just like most parents don't name their children Judas or even Adolf these days because of the past, neither would have a parent named a daughter Jezebel. The name became synonymous with idolatry, because she was the OT queen who led Israel into the worship of other gods.

Why did Ahab marry such an evil, wicked woman, who was as ruthless as any man, if not more so? He wanted Israel's borders to be secure. Damascus on the northeast border was a threat to their security so Ahab made a military and commercial treaty with Phoenicia and gained access both to protection and their rich trade markets. This treaty was sealed with the Phoenicians by the marriage of Ahab, king of Israel, and Jezebel, daughter of the Phoenician king.

Our picture of Jezebel tends to be that of seductress, scantily clad, with painted eyes and the whole works. I suspect that a business suit and high heels might be more appropriate. While Jesus certainly addresses sexual immorality, He focuses on the source of that behavior, the teaching and influence of this prophetess, and calls the church on the carpet for tolerating her doctrine of accommodation and expediency. As far as most of the church went, their behavior was commended. In fact, contrasted with Ephesus, they were actually growing in their works, doing more good than previously.

The root problem was the ideology, the teaching that had already led some to compromising behavior and would have certainly infected the rest. In Pergamum, there was some moral compromise but in Thyatira, there was theological compromise. The church at Ephesus was

weak in love but quick to condemn falsehood. They received Christ's rebuke. This church was strong in love but hesitant to condemn falsehood. They also received rebuke. We are called to speak the truth in love.

We don't know the exact content of her doctrine but we have to believe that it went something like this: "In order to truly understand the depths of God's grace, we must plumb the depths of evil and of Satan. Because we possess a special knowledge, we can participate in these feasts—the deep things of Satan—and not be tainted by them." Evidently this debate—can a Christian participate in the trade guild's feasts?—had been raging for some time. This prophetess had plenty of time to see the light and chosen not to do so.

In essence, her teaching was one of expediency. Expediency is best summed up by the expression: "GO ALONG TO GET ALONG." [Slide 8] It was the idea that one has to get along in this world, that religious beliefs are better keep in the closet, restricted to the sanctuary, and that you shouldn't try and practice your faith on the job or at the school.

Ultimately, the decision is this: will I be a thermometer or a thermostat? Will I simply reflect the world around me or will I attempt, in the power of God, to change it? What a challenge for this church, living in a city not highly esteemed by the culture! Notice that Christ promises them a rod of iron with which the battle will be won. It wasn't a sword; this wasn't a Roman town and they weren't familiar with the sword. But a rod of iron—they made those there, they manufactured them. Christ spoke to them in their context.

Principle over Expediency means...

- (1) Compromise wins over Courage [Slide 9]

Expedient living is always easier than principled living. It is harder to go against the flow, to run against the grain. Following Christ requires the courage to meet the culture head on. (Story about man driving the wrong way on the expressway, "It's not one, it's hundreds of them!")

- (2) Deception wins over Truth [Slide 10]

Christ's letter to this church is the only one that contains a quotation from Scripture. Perhaps this church, a loving church, a relational church, needed to be reminded that people are only one of the two things that last forever, the other being the Word of God. We are to speak in love but also in truth. The two great commandments involved loving people but also loving God, which is first.

A principle is something that is always true but rarely easy.

[Slide 11] Does Christ understand this dilemma? Yes, He does. It was an appeal to expediency that led the religious leaders to conclude that He needed to die. Expediency put Jesus on the cross.

...it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish."
John 11:50 (NASB)

The advice of Caiaphus, the high priest, is the dilemma for most pastors. Expediency says it is crazy to ignore the many for the sake of the one. And a pastor has to decide if he will leave the 99 to seek the one that is lost. (Hmmm, wasn't there a parable somewhere that talked about that?) A pastor has to decide if he will be an expedient shepherd or a principled shepherd. And a church has to decide what type of shepherd they are going to pressure him to be. Just like the trade guilds in Thyatira that pressured people at an economic pinch point, some churches say, "If you want to work here, you better take care of the whole and tend to our needs."

[Slide 12] We're all familiar with the WWJD bracelet. Some may be wearing one today. (Ironically, it is most frequently shoplifted item from Christian bookstores.) In Thyatira, everyone had a WWJD bracelet on. For some, the J should for Jesus while, for others, it should for Jezebel. Some chose principle. Others chose expediency. Some chose the easy way and the broad path while others chose the road less traveled.

We choose as well as we move forward in this transitional process. Becoming a missional church, a kingdom-focused church, an outwardly focused church, is the hard way, the courageous way. The easy way is to say, "Let's just take care of our own." This is our choice. We will make it as a church.

Invitation:

That last statement could be misleading. We will choose as a church but we will do so through hundreds of individual decisions. Even though Christ wrote to the church at Thyatira, He closed with this promise and invitation: "He who overcomes...He who has an ear..."

The power of many comes down to the power of one. How can I be sure that anything will ever happen around me until I make my own choice? How can I ever hope anything great for my children and my family until I choose God's greatness for myself? How can I ever hope to see change around me until there is change within me?

It begins with you.