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*THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN THYATIRA.*

THIS is in many respects the most obscure, as it is certainly the longest, and probably in a historical view the most instructive of all the Seven Letters. Its obscurity is doubtless caused in a considerable degree by the fact that the history of Thyatira, and the character and circumstances of the city in the first century after Christ, are almost entirely unknown to us. Hence those allusions to the past history and the present situation of affairs in the city, which in the case of the first three cities we have found the most instructive and illuminative parts of each letter, are in the case of Thyatira the most obscure. We have some idea of what were the proper topics for an orator to enlarge on when he wished to please the people of Ephesus or Pergamum. We know how a rhetorician like Aelius Aristides tickled the ears of the Smyrnaeans. We know what events in the past history of those cities, as well as of Sardis, had sunk into the heart of the inhabitants, and were remembered by all with ever fresh joy or sorrow. Even in the case of the secondary cities, Laodiceia and Philadelpheia, we learn something from various ancient authorities about the leading facts of their history and present circumstances, the sources of their wealth, the staple of their trade, the disasters that had befallen them. But about Thyatira we know extremely little. Historians and ancient writers generally rarely allude to it, and the numerous inscriptions which have been discovered and published throw little or no light (so far as yet known) upon the letter which we are now studying.

There is a considerable resemblance between the Thyatiran and Pergamenian letters. Those were the only two of the Seven Cities which had been strongly affected by the

Nicolaitan teaching, and both letters are dominated by the strenuous hatred of the writer for that heresy. Moreover, those two cities lay a little apart from the rest, away in the north of Lydia, or even across the frontier in the land of Mysia,<sup>1</sup> and it may therefore be presumed that they had a certain local character in common. Accordingly, there is a distinct type common to the preliminary address and the promise at the end of those two letters. The strength of authority, the sword as the symbol of the power of life and death,<sup>2</sup> the tessera inscribed with the secret name of might—such are the topics that give character to the Pergamenian exordium and conclusion. The Thyatiran letter proceeds from “the Son of God, who hath His eyes like a flame of fire and His feet like unto bright bronze”<sup>3</sup> (the very hard alloyed metal, used for weapons, and under proper treatment assuming a brilliant polished gleam approximating to gold); to the victorious Christian of Thyatira is promised “authority over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers”; the terror and, as one might almost say, the cruelty of this promise is mitigated by the conclusion, “and I will give him the morning star.” The spirit of the address and the promise is throughout of dazzlingly impressive might, authority, the irresistible strength of a great monarch, and a vast, well-ordered army.

<sup>1</sup> Pergamum was regularly reckoned a Mysian city, but the frontier of Mysia was so uncertain as to be proverbial, and Thyatira, while close to the frontier, and called by some “the last city of Mysia,” was more usually counted Lydian, but was in the closest relations with Pergamum, and under the immediate power of the Pergamenian kings.

<sup>2</sup> The right of the sword, *jus gladii*, was the customary and technical term among the Romans to designate that power. Officials were divided into two classes, higher and lower, according as they had the *jus gladii* or not.

<sup>3</sup> The term chalkolibanos, which is used in the Apocalypse, does not occur elsewhere; but the context and the general sense of the passage show that it is likely to be some kind of bronze, an alloy much used by the ancients, and made very skilfully so as to be capable of taking a keen edge as well as a brilliant hue.

In short, just as in the case of Pergamum, so here again, the promise sets the true and victorious Christian in the place and dignity of the Roman Emperor. Rome was the only power on earth that exercised authority over the nations, and ruled them with a rod of iron, and smashed them like potsherds; and the description is startlingly applicable to the Roman State. Accordingly the promise here designates the victor as heir to a greater, more terrible, more irresistible strength than even the power of the mighty Empire with all its legions. The opposition was more precisely and antithetically expressed in the case of Pergamum, at least to the readers who were within the circle of ancient ideas and education; though probably the modern mind is likely to recognize the antithesis between the Church and the Empire more readily and clearly in the Thyatiran letter. We at the distance of nearly 2,000 years can more readily call up in imagination the military strength of the Empire and its armies; but in the first century the minds of men were filled and awed by the thought of the Emperor as the central figure of the whole earth, concentrating on himself the loyal religious feelings of all nations, and holding in his hands that complete authority, indefinable because too wide for definition, which the autocrat of the civilized world exercised by the simple expression of his will; and that is the idea to which the Pergamian letter appealed.

It could not escape the attention of an Asian reader at that time that this irresistible power and strength were promised to the city which was probably the smallest<sup>1</sup> and feeblest, certainly in general estimation the least distinguished and famous, of all the Seven Cities. The local surroundings of Thyatira accentuate this comparatively humble character of its fortunes. It lies in the middle of

<sup>1</sup> Philadelphæa was perhaps smaller than Thyatira; but it certainly enjoyed a history characterized by greater distinction and reputation.

a long valley running north and south between parallel ridges of hills of no great elevation, which rise with gentle slope from the valley. In the midst of the modern city there is a low tumulus, which probably served for an acropolis. Thus there is the most marked contrast between the situation of Thyatira—now “sleeping safe in the bosom of the plain” under the peace of the Roman rule, though (if any enemies had existed) easily open to attack from every side, dominated by even those low and gentle ranges of hills on east and west, beautiful with a gentle, smiling, luxuriant softness and grace—and the proud and lofty acropolis of Sardis, or the huge hill of Pergamum, or the mountain-walls of Ephesus and the castled hill of Smyrna, each with its harbour, or the long sloping hillside on which Philadelpheia rises high above its plain, or the plateau of Laodiceia, not lofty, yet springing sharp and bold from the plain of the Lycus, crowned with a long line of strong walls and so situated on the protruding apex of a triangular extent of hilly ground that it seems to stand up in the middle of the plain.

Military skill, such as the Pergamenian kings had at their command, could of course so fortify Thyatira as to make it strong enough to hold the passage up the long valley. The importance of the city to the kings lay in the fact that it guarded the main road from the Hermus valley and Lydia generally to Pergamum. Its function in the world at first had been to serve as attendant and guard to the governing royal city. Now, under the long peace of the imperial rule, it had become a town of trade and peaceful industry, profiting by its command of a fertile plain and still more by its situation on a great road; and beyond all doubt the military character of its foundation by the kings, as a garrison of Macedonian soldiers to block the road to their capital from the south, had long disappeared.

Thus Thyatira of all the Seven Cities seemed in every

way the least fitted by nature and by history to rule over the nations ; and it could not fail to be observed by the Asian readers as a notable thing, that the Church of this least famous and weakest of the cities should be promised such a future of strength and universal authority. Beyond all doubt the writer of the Seven Letters, who knew the cities so well, must have been conscious of this, and must have relied on it for the effect which he aimed at.

As we go through the Seven Letters point by point, each detail confirms our impression of the unhesitating and sublime confidence in the victory of the Church which prompts and enlivens them. The Emperor, the Roman State, with its patriotism, its religion, and its armies, the brutal populace of the cities, the Jews, and every other enemy of the Church, all are raging and persecuting and slaying to the utmost of their power. But their power is naught. The real Church stands outside of their reach, immeasurably above them, secure and triumphant, "eternal in the heavens," while the individual Christians work out their victory in their own life and above all by their death ; so that the more successfully the enemy kills them off, the more absolute is his defeat, and the more complete and immediate is their victory. The weakest and least honoured among those Christian martyrs, as he gains his victory by death, is invested with that authority over the nations, which the proud Empire believed that its officials and governors wielded, and rules with a power more supreme than that of Rome herself.

The conclusion of the promise, "I will give him the morning star," seems to have been added with the calculated intention of expressing the other side of the Christian character. The honour promised was evidently too exclusively terrible. But the addition must be in keeping with the rest of the promise. The brightness, gleam, and glitter, as if of "an army with banners," which rules through the

opening address and the concluding promise, is expressed in a milder spirit, without the terrible character, though the brilliance remains or is even increased, in the image of "the morning star."

So little is known about the tutelary deity of Thyatira, Apollo Tyrimnaios, that it is impossible to say whether any contrast is intended between the description of the sender of the message and that native deity. He was a sun-god, represented often with radiated head, like a star or the sun; and often he bears on his shoulder a double-edged battle-axe. Thus brilliant glitter and the smashing power of a war-god or a great army are suitable to him.

Having observed the close relation between the Pergamenian and the Thyatiran letter, we shall recognize a similar analogy between the Ephesian and the Sardian, and again between the Smyrnaean and the Philadelphian letters. Those six letters constitute three pairs, and each pair must be studied not only separately but also in the mutual relation of its two parts. Only the Laodicean letter stands alone, just as Laodiceia stood apart from the other six, the representative of the distant and very different Phrygian land.

So far, it is easy to recognize the appropriateness of the address and the concluding promise in this letter. But, beyond this, there is undoubtedly much that is hidden from us. Whether the *chalkolibanos*, which is peculiar to this part of the Apocalypse, had any special connexion with Thyatira must remain doubtful. It is certain that the city was a trading and manufacturing centre. The workers in bronze were one of its numerous trade-guilds;<sup>1</sup> and the question may be thrown out, but cannot be at present answered, whether *chalkolibanos* was a Thyatiran manu-

<sup>1</sup> The guild (or is it a pair of guilds?) *χαλκείς χαλκοτύποι* is mentioned in an inscription.

facture. The word occurs also in i. 15 (and nowhere else in ancient literature); but the opening description of "one like unto a son of man," i. 12 ff., was obviously composed with a view to the Seven Letters, so as to exhibit there, united in one personality, the various characteristics which were to be thereafter mentioned separately in the letters. Accordingly the chalkolibanos may probably have suggested itself in the first place for the purposes of the Thyatiran letter; so that its use in i. 15 may be secondary, merely to prepare for the letter.

As usual, the letter proper begins with the statement that the writer is well acquainted with the history and fortunes of the Thyatiran Church. The brief first statement is entirely laudatory. "I know thy works, and thy love and faith and ministry and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first." Whereas Ephesus had fallen away from its original spirit and enthusiasm, Thyatira had grown more energetic as time elapsed.

But after this complimentary opening, the letter denounces the state of the Thyatiran Church in the most outspoken and unreserved way. It had permitted and encouraged the Nicolaitan doctrine and harboured the principal exponent of that doctrine in the Province.

We observe here, first of all, that the Nicolaitan doctrine had not caused any falling off in the good deeds of the Church. On the contrary, it was probably the emulation between the two parties or sections of the Church, and the desire of the Nicolaitans to show that they were quite as fervent in the faith as the simpler Christians whose opinions they desired to correct, that caused the improvement in the "works" of the Thyatiran Church. We recognize that it was quite possible for Nicolaitans to continue to cherish "love and faith and ministry and patience," and to improve in the active performance of the practical work of a congregation (among which public charities and



subscriptions were doubtless an important part). Public subscriptions for patriotic and religious purposes were common in the Graeco-Roman world; the two classes were almost equivalent in ancient feeling; all patriotic purposes took a religious form, and though only the religious purpose is as a rule mentioned in the inscriptions in which such contributions are recorded, the real motive in most cases was patriotic, and the custom of making such subscriptions was undoubtedly kept up by the Christian Church generally (see Acts xi. 29, xxiv. 17, 1 Cor. xvi. 1, 2, 2 Cor. ix. 1-5). The Thyatiran Nicolaitans, true to their cherished principle of assimilating the Church usage as far as possible to the character of existing society, would naturally encourage and maintain the custom. It makes this letter more credible in other points, that in this one it cordially admits and praises the generosity of the whole Thyatiran Church, including the Nicolaitans.

It seems therefore to be beyond all doubt that, as a rule, the Nicolaitans of Thyatira, with the prophetess as their leader, were still active and unwearied members of the Church, "full of good works," and respected by the whole congregation for their general character and way of life. The sentiment entertained with regard to them by the congregation is attested by the letter: "Thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, and she teacheth." It is evident that the lady who is here so rudely referred to was generally accepted in Thyatira as a regular teacher, and as a prophetess and leader in the Church. There was no serious, general, active opposition to her; and therein lay the fault of the whole congregation; she had firmly established herself in the approval of the congregation; and, as we have seen, she was so respected because by her liberal and zealous and energetic life she had deserved the public esteem. She was evidently an active and managing lady after the style of Lydia, the

Thyatiran merchant and head of a household at Philippi ; and it is an interesting coincidence that the only two women of Thyatira mentioned in the New Testament are so like one another in character. The question might even suggest itself whether they may not be the same person, since Lydia seems to disappear from Philippian history (so far as we are informed of it) soon after St. Paul's visit to the city. But this question must undoubtedly be answered in the negative, for it is utterly improbable that the hostess of St. Paul would ever be spoken about so mercilessly and savagely as this poor prophetess is here.

I believe, as stated in the article on the country Lydia in Dr. Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, that Lydia was only a secondary name, "the Lydian," and that either Syntyche or Euodia, Phil. iv. 2, was her primary name, the secondary name being (as often) the commonly used and familiar name, like Priscilla for Prisca, Silas for Silvanus, Apollos for Apollonius. The prophetess furnishes just one more example of the great influence exerted by women in the primitive Church.

The extremely bitter and almost virulent tone in which the prophetess is spoken of seems, therefore, not to be due to her personal character, but to be caused entirely by the principles which she set forth in a too persuasive and successful way : she was exercising an unhealthy influence, and her many excellent qualities made her the more dangerous, because they increased the authority of her words. At the present day, when we love milder manners and are full of allowance for difference of opinion and conduct in others, the harshness with which disapproval is here expressed must seem inharmonious and repellent. But the writer was influenced by other ways of thinking and different principles of action ; and we should not estimate either him or the prophetess by twentieth century standards.

It may be added that I have read more than once Prof. E. Schürer's paper on the Thyatiran Jezebel (published, if my memory does not deceive me, in a volume of papers presented to Prof. Weizsäcker, or some other distinguished Biblical scholar)<sup>1</sup>—at first with admiration and interest, but with growing dissatisfaction during subsequent thought, until in a final closer study of the whole Seven Letters, it seems to me to be entirely mistaken in its whole line of interpretation. He finds in "Jezebel" a prophetess and priestess of the temple of a Chaldaean Sibyl in Thyatira, where a mixture of pagan rites with Jewish ideas was practised.

It is unnecessary here to dilate on the importance of the order of prophets in the primitive Church; but we should be glad to know more about this Thyatiran prophetess, a person of broad views and reasonable mind, who played a prominent part in a great religious movement, and perished defeated and decried. She ranks with the Montanist prophetesses of the second century, or the Cappadocian prophetess about whom Firmilian wrote to Cyprian in the third century; one of those leading women who seem to have emphasized too strongly one side of a case, quite reasonable in itself, through failure to see the other side sufficiently. They all suffer the hard fate of being known only through the mouth of bitter enemies, who had no sympathy for their opinions, whose disapproval of their opinions was expressed in the harsh, contemptuous, half-figurative language of ancient moral condemnation. Thus for the most part they are stigmatized as persons of the worst character and the vilest life.

We take a much more favourable view of the character of the lady of Thyatira than the commentators usually do. Thus Mr. Anderson Scott speaks of her teaching as "encouragement to licentiousness," and of the "libertinism which was taught and practised in Thyatira"; and she is

<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in the previous article, this one also is more subject than usual to inaccuracy, having been written almost without books.

generally regarded as entirely false, abandoned and immoral in her life and her teaching. This usual view is founded mainly on the misinterpretation of ii. 22, which will be explained in the sequel. It seems to us to miss completely the real character and the serious nature of the question which was being agitated at the time, and which probably was finally determined and set at rest by the decision stated in the Seven Letters and in the oral teaching of the author. In this and various other so-called "heresies" the right side was not so clear and self-evident as it is commonly represented in the usual popularly accepted histories of the Church and commentaries on the ancient authorities. The prophetess was not all evil—that idea is absolutely contradictory of the already quoted words of the letter, ii. 19—and the opposite party had no monopoly of the good.

The strong language of ii. 20, 21 is due in part to the common symbolism found in the Old Testament and elsewhere, describing the lapses of Israel into idolatry as adultery and gross immorality. But in greater measure it is due to the fact that the idolatrous ritual of paganism was always in practice associated with immoral customs of various kinds; that (even although a few persons of higher mind and nobler nature might perhaps recognize that the immorality was not an essential part of the pagan ritual, but was due to degeneracy and degradation) it was impossible to dissociate the one from the other; and that the universal opinion of pagan society accepted as natural and justifiable and right—if not carried to ruinous extremes—such a way of life, with such relations between the sexes, as Christianity and Judaism have always stigmatized as vicious, degrading, and essentially wrong. The principles of the Nicolaitans seemed to St. John certain to lead to an acquiescence in this commonly accepted standard of pagan society, and he held that the Nicolaitan prophetess was

responsible for all that followed from her teaching. That he was right no one can doubt who studies the history of Greek and Roman and West Asiatic paganism as a practical force in human life. That there were lofty qualities and some high ideals in those pagan religions the present writer has always recognized and maintained in the most emphatic terms; but, in human nature, the inevitable tendency of paganism was towards a low standard of moral life, as he has tried to set forth clearly in an account of the Religion of Greece and Asia Minor in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. v.

A third reason also determined the author to employ the strong language which occurs in ii. 20. Evidently the decision of the Apostolic Council, though relating to a different question, dictated the form which the author of the letter has employed. That decision was evidently present in his memory as authoritative on an allied question; and he alludes to it in an easily understood way, which he evidently expected his readers to appreciate. He turns in v. 24 to address the section of the Thyatiran Church which had not accepted the Nicolaitan teaching, and tells them that he lays no other burden upon them. The burden which has been already imposed on all Christians by the Council is sufficient, "These necessary things, that ye abstain from things sacrificed to idols . . . and from fornication" (Acts xv. 28). The expression, "no other burden," implies that the necessary minimum burden is already before the writer's mind, and that he assumes it to be also before the reader's mind; he assumes that the readers have already caught the allusion in ii. 20, "She teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols," i.e. she teaches them to violate the fundamental rule of the Apostolic Council. But, as he implies, while this minimum burden must be borne and cannot be avoided by any sophistry and skilful religious

casuistry—what the Nicolaitans called “transcendental conception of the things of God,” but which is really “the cryptic lore and deep lies of the devil”—he imposes on them no further burden. This is sufficient, but it is inevitable; there is no more to be said. The Nicolaitans explain this away, and thereby condemn themselves.

I have assumed hitherto that the true reading is “the woman Jezebel,” as in R.V. and A.V.; but with Alford I think it probable that the proper text is *τὴν γυναῖκα σου*, where the form which commonly is equivalent to “thy wife” is used symbolically to indicate a specially prominent woman in the Thyatiran Church. There was great temptation to drop out *σου*, to avoid the apparent incongruity of calling Jezebel the wife of the Church; and there was no reason for its insertion, if it had not originally had a place in the text. As we understand the context, the addition of *σου* only expresses more emphatically a meaning which lies in the passage as a whole, even when *σου* is omitted.

The following sentences are the one main source of all the little we can gather about the Nicolaitan principles. The allusions in the Pergamenian letter, obscure in themselves, become more intelligible when read in connexion with the words here. The obscurity is due to our ignorance of what was familiar to the original Asian readers. They were living through these questions, and caught every allusion and hint that the writer of the letter makes.

The questions which are here treated belong to an early period in the history of the Church. They are connected with the general conduct of pagan converts in the Church. How much should be required of them? What burdens should be imposed on them? The principles that should regulate their conduct are here regarded, of course, from the point of view of their relation to the general society of the cities in which they lived. They had for the most part

been members, and some of them leading members, of that society before their conversion: we may here leave out of sight the Christianized Jews in the Asian congregations, who had in a way been outside of that society from the beginning, for, though they were a part, and possibly even an influential part, of the Church, yet the Seven Letters were not intended specially for them, and hardly touch the questions that most intimately concerned them. These letters are addressed to pagan converts, and set forth in a figurative way the principles that they should follow in their relations with ordinary society and the Roman State.

On the other hand, the relation of the pagan converts to Judaism is hardly alluded to in the Seven Letters. That question was now past and done with; the final answer had been given; there was no need for further instructions about it. In practice, of course, the relation between Jewish Christians and pagan converts continued to exist in the congregations; but the general principles were now admitted, and were of such a kind as to place an almost impassable barrier between the national Jews and the Church. To the writer of the Seven Letters, the Jews were the sham Jews, "the synagogue of Satan," according to a twice repeated expression: God had turned away from them, and had preferred the pagan converts, who now were the true seed of Abraham: the sham Jews would have to recognize the facts, accept the situation, and humble themselves before the Gentile Christians: "Behold, I give of the Synagogue of Satan, of them which say they are Jews and they are not, but speak falsely; behold I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee." Thus the situation in the Church was developed now far beyond what it had been in the time of St. Paul: and his settlement of the Jewish question had been accepted completely by the Church, and is stated as emphatically and aggressively here by this Jewish writer as by Paul himself.

It is unnecessary here to repeat the elaborate discussion of this subject already given in the EXPOSITOR, present series, vol. ii. pp. 429-444, vol. iii. 93-110. There some of the many difficulties are described which presented themselves every day to the converts from paganism. It was accepted on all hands that they were to continue to live in the world, and were not to seek to withdraw entirely out of it (1 Cor. v. 10). There were certain accepted customs, rules of politeness and courtesy, ways of living and acting, which were recommended by their graceful, refined, elegant character, and other ways which without any special grace were recommended simply because they were the ordinary methods of behaviour. If we live in a long-established and cultivated society, we must do many things, not because we specially approve of them, or derive pleasure or advantage of any kind from them, but simply from consideration for the feelings of others, who expect us to do as the rest of society does. There are even some things which we hardly quite approve; yet we do not feel that we ought to condemn them openly and withdraw in a marked way from social gatherings where they are practised. Such extremely strict carrying out of our own principles would quickly become harsh, rude, and misanthropic; and would justly expose any one who was often guilty of it to the charge of self-conceit and spiritual pride.

How much might one accept; and what must one condemn? Such questions as these were daily presenting themselves to the Christians in the Graeco-Roman cities; and they were then almost invariably complicated by the additional difficulty that all established usages, social customs, rules of polite conduct, forms of graceful courtesy, were (with rare exceptions) implicated in and coloured by idolatrous associations. Grace before meat, thanksgiving after food, were in the strictest sense slight acts of acknowledgment of the kindness and the rights of pagan divinities. Such cere-



monies had often become mere forms, and those who complied with those customs were often hardly conscious of the religious character of the action. How far was the Christian bound to take notice of their idolatrous character and to avoid acting in accordance with them, or even to express open disapproval of them? So far as we can gather, the rule laid down by St. Paul, and the practice of the Church, was that only in quite exceptional, rare cases should open disapproval of the customs of society be expressed; in many cases, where the idolatrous connexion was not obvious, but only veiled or remote, the Christian might (and perhaps even ought to) comply with the usual forms, unless his attention was expressly called by any one of the guests to the idolatrous connexion; in that case that rude remark was equivalent to a challenge either to deny or affirm his religion, and the Christian must affirm his religion, and refuse compliance. But, where the idolatrous character of the act was patent and generally recognized, the Christian must refuse compliance. There was a general tendency among the Christians to avoid situations, offices, and paths of life, in which the performance of idolatrous ceremonial was necessary; and on this account they were generally stigmatized as morose, hostile to existing society, deficient in active patriotism, if not actually disloyal.

Besides these slighter cases, there were many of a much more serious character. The Roman soldier, marching under the colours of his regiment, was marching under the standard of idolatry, for the standards (*signa*) were all divine, and worship was paid to them by the soldiers as a duty of the service, and all contained one or more idolatrous symbols or representations; moreover he was frequently required, standing in his place in the ranks, to take part in idolatrous acts of worship. The soldier could not retire and take to some other way of life, for he was bound to the service through a long term of years. Here, again, the rule

and practice of the Church seems to have been that in ordinary circumstances the converted soldier should remain passive, and as far as possible silent, during the ceremony at which he was compulsorily present, but should not actively protest. A similar practice was encouraged by the Church in other departments of life and work. But in every case, and in every profession, the Christian, who in ordinary circumstances might remain passive and unprotesting, was liable to be pointedly challenged as to whether he willingly would perform this act of worship of the deity whom he considered false. In case of such a challenge, there was only one course open. The Christian could not comply with a demand which was expressly made a test of his faith.

But apart from all these many doubtful cases where the right line of conduct was difficult to determine and might vary according to circumstances, there was a large number of cases in which the decision of the early leaders of the Church was absolute and unvarying. In whatsoever society, or company, or meeting, or ceremonial, the condition of presence and membership lay in the performance of pagan ritual as an express and declared act of religion, the Christian must have no part or lot, and could not accept membership or even be present. Here the Nicolaitans took the opposite view, and could defend their opinion by many excellent, thoroughly reasonable and highly philosophic arguments. To illustrate this class of cases, we may take an example of a meeting which was permissible, and of one which was not, according to the opinion of those early leaders of the Church. A meeting of the citizens of a city for political purposes was always inaugurated by pagan ritual, and according to the strict original theory the citizens in this political assembly were all united in the worship of the patron national deity in whose honour the opening ceremonies were performed; but the ritual had long be-

come a mere form, and nobody was in practice conscious that the condition of presence in the assembly lay in the loyal service of the national deity. The political condition was the only one that was practically remembered: every member of a city tribe had a right to be present and vote. The Christian citizen might attend and vote in such a meeting, ignoring and passing in silence the opening religious ceremony.

But, on the other hand, there were numerous societies for a vast variety of purposes, the condition of membership in which was professedly and explicitly the willingness to engage in the worship of a pagan deity, because the society met in the worship of that deity, the name of the society was often a religious name, and the place of meeting was dedicated to the deity, and thus was constituted a temple for his worship. The Epistles of Paul, Peter, Jude, and the Seven Letters, all touch on this topic, and all are agreed: the true Christian cannot be a member of such societies. The Nicolaitans taught that Christians ought to remain members; and doubtless added that they would exercise a good influence on them by continuing in them.

This very simple and practical explanation will, doubtless, seem to many scholars to be too slight for the serious treatment that the subject receives in the two letters which we are studying. Such scholars regard grave matters of dogma as being the proper subject for treatment in the early Christian documents; they will probably ridicule the suggestion that the question whether a Christian should join a club or not demanded the serious notice of an apostle, and declare that this was the sort of question on which the Church kept an open mind, and left great liberty to individuals to act as they thought right (just as they did in regard to military service, magistracies, and other important matters); and will require that Nicolaitanism should be regarded from a graver dogmatic point of view. The

present writer must confess that those graver subjects of dogma seem to him to have been much over-estimated; it was not dogma that moved the world, but life. Frequently, when rival parties and rival nations fought with one another as to which of two opposed dogmas was the truth, they had been arrayed against one another by more deep-seated and vital causes, and merely inscribed at the last the dogmas on their standards or chose them as watchwords or symbols. We are tired of those elaborate discussions of the fine, wire-drawn, subtle distinctions between sects, and of the principles of heresies, and we desire to see the real differences in life and conduct receive more attention.

It is not difficult to show how important in practical life was this question as to the right of Christians to be members of social clubs. The clubs were one of the most deep-rooted customs of Graeco-Roman society: some were social, some political, some for mutual benefit, but all took a religious form. New religions usually spread by means of such clubs. The clubs bound their members closely together in virtue of the common sacrificial meal, a scene of enjoyment following on a religious ceremony. They represented in its strongest form the pagan spirit in society; and they were strongest among the middle classes in the great cities, persons who possessed at least some fair amount of money and made some pretension to education, breeding and knowledge of the world. To hold aloof from the clubs was to set oneself down as a mean-spirited, grudging, ill-conditioned person, hostile to existing society, devoid of generous impulse and kindly neighbourly feeling, an enemy of mankind.

The very fact that this subject was treated (as we have seen) so frequently, shows that the question was not easily decided, but long occupied the attention of the Church and its leaders. It was almost purely a social and

practical question; and no subject presents such difficulties to the legislator as one which touches the fabric of society and the ordinary conduct of life. In 1 Cor. (as was pointed out in the EXPOSITOR, *loc. cit.* ii. p. 436) the subject, though not formally brought before St. Paul for decision, was practically involved in a question which was submitted to him, but he did not impose any absolute prohibition; and he tried to place the Corinthians on a higher plane of thought so that they might see clearly all that was involved and judge for themselves rightly.

After this the question must have frequently called for consideration, and a certain body of teaching had been formulated. It is clear that the Pergamenian and Thyatiran letters assume in the readers the knowledge of such teaching as familiar; and 2 Peter ii. 1 ff. refers to the same formulated teaching (EXPOSITOR, *loc. cit.* iii. p. 106 ff.). This teaching quoted examples from Old Testament history (especially Balaam or Sodom and Gomorrah) as a warning of the result that must inevitably follow from laxity in this matter; it drew scathing pictures of the revelry, licence and intoxication of spirit which characterized the feasts of these pagan religious societies, where from an early hour in the afternoon the members, lounging on the dining-couches, ate and drank and were amused by troops "of singing and of dancing slaves"; it argued that such periodically recurring scenes of excitement must be fatal to all reasonable, moderate, self-restraining spirit. This steadily growing body of formulated moral principles on the subject was set aside by the Nicolaitans, who taught, on the contrary (as is said in 2 Peter *l.c.*) that men should have confidence in their own character and judgment, and promised to set them free from a hard law, while they were in reality enticing back to lascivious enjoyment the young converts who had barely "escaped the defilements of the world."

The author of the letters now before us depends for his

effect on such striking pictures as that in 2 Peter of revels which were not merely condoned by pagan opinion, but were regarded as a duty, in which graver natures ought occasionally to relax their seriousness, and yield to the impulses of nature, in order to return again with fresh zest to the real work of life. The author had himself often already set before his readers orally the contrast between that pagan spirit of liberty and animalism, and the true Christian spirit; and had counselled the Thyatiran prophetess to wiser principles.

Thus, this controversy was of the utmost importance in the early Church. It affected and determined, more than any other, the relation of the new religion to the existing forms and character of Graeco-Roman city society. The real meaning of it was this—should the Church accept the existing forms of society and social unions, or declare war against them? And this again implied another question—should Christianity conform to the existing, accepted principles of society, or should it force society to conform to its principles? When the question is thus put in its full and true implication, we see forthwith how entirely wrong the Nicolaitans and their Thyatiran prophetess were; we recognize that the whole future of Christianity was at stake over this question; and we are struck once more with admiration at the unerring insight with which the Apostles gauged every question that presented itself in that complicated life of the period, and the quick sure decision with which they seized and insisted on the essential, and neglected the accidental and secondary aspects of the case. We can now understand why St. John condemns that very worthy, active, and managing, but utterly mistaken lady of Thyatira in such hard and cruel and, one might almost say, unfair language; he saw that she was fumbling about with questions which she was quite incapable of comprehending, full of complacent satisfaction with her superficial views as to the fairness

and reasonableness of allowing the poor to profit by those quite praiseworthy associations which did so much good (though containing some regrettable features which might easily be ignored by a philosophic mind), and misusing her influence, acquired by good works and persuasive speaking, to lead her fellow-Christians astray. If she were successful, Christianity must melt and be absorbed into the Graeco-Roman society, highly cultivated, but over-developed, morbid, unhealthy, "fast" (in modern slang). But she would not be successful. The mind which could see the Church's victory over the destroying Empire consummated in the death of every Christian had no fear of what the lady of Thyatira might do. "I will kill her children (i.e. her disciples and perverts) with death; <sup>1</sup> and all the Churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts."

It was a hard and stern discipline, which undoubtedly left out some of the most charming, right and lovable sides of life and human nature; but it may be doubted if any less stern discipline could have availed to teach the existing world and bend it to the reign of law. It is a case similar to that of Scotland under the old Calvinistic régime, stern and hard and narrow; would any milder and more lovable rule ever have been able to tame a stubborn and self-willed race, among whom law had never been able to establish itself firmly?

And as to the prophetess, she had had long time to think and to learn wisdom; the question had been agitated for a great many years; but she had learned nothing and forgotten nothing, and only clung more closely to the policy of compromising with idolatry. Her end is expressed with a grim irony, which was probably far more full of meaning

<sup>1</sup> Probably death is here to be understood as "incurable disease," according to the universal belief that disease (and especially fever, in which there is no obvious affection of any organ) was the weapon of Divine power.

to the Thyatirans than to modern readers: there are allusions in the passage that escape us. She should have her last great sacrificial meal at one of those associations. "I set her on a dining-couch, and her vile associates with her, and they shall have opportunity to enjoy—great tribulation: unless *they* repent, for *she* has shown that she cannot repent." <sup>1</sup>

Probably, part of the effect of this denunciation depends on the ancient custom and usage as regards women. Though women had in many respects a position of considerable freedom in Anatolian cities, as has been pointed out by many writers, yet it may be doubted whether ladies in good society took part in the club-dinners. We do not know enough on the subject, however, to speak with any confidence; and can only express the belief that the status of ladies in the Lydian cities lent point to this passage. Possibly for her to be thus set down at the table was equivalent to saying that in her own life she would show the effect of the principles which she taught others to follow, and would sit at the revels like one of the light women.<sup>2</sup>

It may be regarded as certain that the importance of the trade guilds in Thyatira made the Nicolaitan doctrine very popular there. The guilds were very numerous in that city, and are often mentioned in great variety in the inscriptions. It was, certainly, hardly possible for a tradesman to maintain his business in Thyatira without belonging to the guild of his trade. The guilds were corporate bodies, taking active measures to

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of this passage is quite misrepresented in the Authorized and Revised Versions, see EXPOSITOR, l.c.

<sup>2</sup> That women were members of religious associations (though not, apparently, in great numbers), is of course well known; but that is only the beginning of the question. What was their position and rule of life? How far did they take part in the meal and revel that followed the sacrifice?



protect the common interests, owning property, passing decrees, and exercising considerable powers; they also, undoubtedly, were benefit societies, and in many respects healthy and praiseworthy associations. In no other city are they so conspicuous. It was therefore a serious thing for a Thyatiran to cut himself off from his guild.

To the remnant of the Thyatiran Church—those who, while not rejecting the prophetess, and showing clearly that they “hated the works of the Nicolaitans,” had not actively carried out her teaching in practice—one word was sufficient. It was sufficient that they should follow the established principle, and act according to the law as stated in the Apostolic council at Jerusalem. No burden beyond that was laid upon them; but that teaching they must obey, and that burden they must bear, until the coming of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

W. M. RAMSAY.

<sup>1</sup> Like the preceding article this one had to be written far from books, and the writer must apologize for any inaccuracies. It has been printed necessarily without proper revision of the sheets.