

Christ Community Covenant Church
Revelation: I have a letter for you!
The letter to the church of Smyrna - Poverty, Persecution and Praise
Pastor Dave Scherrer - June 19, 2011

Ten Commandments Sixth Commandment – Honor your father and mother conversation

A Revelation Poem

With Revelation chapter one in hand,
Jesus ALMIGHTY – the Son of Man!

The Ephesus church worked hard and bold,
But they let their first love grow oh so cold!

The saints of Smyrna – persecuted and poor,
“Your faithfulness earns you so much more!”

Today we have a message for fathers and for their kids. It is a message about authority; about who is in control and why and how they get their control. I think it is a story that has a great deal to say to dads.

This morning we are again going to gaze on the eternal: From chapter one of the book of Revelation we see that Jesus is with the lampstands—more than that He is among the churches—as the Son of Man, the one with power over the nations and with everlasting dominion and glory. He is the great high priest that has put away the sins of his people once and for all. He is as aged and wise and pure as the great white-crowned Ancient of Days, yet with eyes that are aflame with the fire of youth and energy and hope and exhilaration for his unstoppable plans for you and for this church and for the world. And from his mouth a spoken truth comes forth with the power of a hurricane and the cut of a two edged sword. He is the ALMIGHTY! He “who was and is and is to come” then speaks to these churches with a voice of encouragement and a voice of confrontation.

This is a passage all about authority. It starts with a self-descriptive statement that leaves no question in the mind of the hearer who is talking and who is in control. This is real authority with a capital ‘A’.

Real authority with a capital ‘A’

Revelation 2:8

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

I think Jesus used these words for his audience on purpose. “First and last” speaks to a special kind of authority. This is the person who has seen it all; from beginning to end. In the case of Jesus, he has designed it all and made it all. This is the authority of experience. And then He says “I am the one who died and came to life.” That of course is the resurrected Jesus. But in an unusual way, Jesus was saying, “You and I Smyrna, we are a lot the same.” Jesus is appealing to the authority of a shared experience. You see the city of Smyrna had been a Greek colony as far back as 1000 B.C. Around 600 B.C. it was invaded and destroyed by the Lydeans and for 400 years there was no city there at all. Then around 300 years before Christ it was rebuilt from scratch as a planned and unified whole by the Romans. It was resurrected from the dead. It was built with streets that were broad, straight, sweeping, and beautifully paved. The city had experienced death and had literally been brought back to life. It is undoubtedly because of Smyrna’s historical past, Christ refers to Himself as, “He who was dead and has come to life.”

In talking about authority this morning it helps us to understand that there are several kinds of authority:

***Bestowed and Earned Respect
Coercive Authority
Kingdom Authority***

You see dads, one of the things that goes into the category of being qualified as a great dad is having “authority”. Going back to our earlier conversation about the commandment to honor our parents, it makes us think that God has bestowed on parents, on fathers, a certain inherent authority that ought to be honored. And that is true. Kids, your father deserves respect by honor of their role as creator, teacher and character builder. But dads, that respect must be maintained. We as fathers can betray that honor by acting dishonorably. I see it too often in my counseling office.

There is a second kind of authority called coercive authority, based on strength and force. Dads, there is no place in the life of your children to establish authority based on coercion. We can force our children and perhaps our wives out of raw power and fear, but it is a short lived authority. As soon as we get a little older and they get bigger, we no longer can maintain that authority. It is a fool’s game to live by power and intimidation. The Roman Empire lived by this rule for a very long time for they were very powerful.

The Emperor’s Power of Coercion

Smyrna was a city that not only bowed to the power of Rome but sought to get in Rome’s good graces by sucking up. There was a competition between the Asia Minor cities of Smyrna, Pergamum and Ephesus to see who could bow down the lowest and then get the most pay off for their compliance. All three of these cities had temples to the Roman ‘deity’ of the Caesar.



Here you can see how they all sit as potential gateways to the east. The set of city fathers knew that if Rome establishes their city as the Asian capitol, there is money and power that goes with that honor. Smyrna was a free city, one that knew the meaning of loyalty and fidelity to Rome unlike most cities. Cicero called it, “one of our most faithful and our most ancient allies.” It was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma and to the spirit of Rome. Her fidelity to Rome was famous in the ancient world. During the time that Jesus was alive, in 27 AD, the Smyrnians (or Smurfs) built a temple to Tiberius to suck up to his coercive power. You can still see the ruins of it today.



They felt it was better to give in and get than to fight and lose. I want to encourage you dads and grandfathers and some day fathers that there is a greater authority than raw power and intimidation. There is the authority that Jesus established, an authority of love and truth.

The Risen King's Authority of Love and Truth

You see it all over the accounts of Jesus' life, maybe best revealed in his teaching on the mountain. He teaches the most powerful lesson ever preached on the Kingdom life and law and the people saw his obvious authority:

Matthew 7:28-29

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

So what does Jesus say to this little church in this difficult place? He says "I know you and I know what you are going through . . ." He says "I know your tribulation and your poverty but you are rich".

"I know your tribulation and poverty but you are rich . . ."

Revelation 2:9-10a

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. . .

The word tribulation is '*qlipsis*' which means "pressure, a literal crushing beneath a weight." The pressure of events is on the Church at Smyrna, and the force of circumstances is trying to crush the Christianity out of them. The word poverty is '*ptwceia*' and it describes absolute poverty or complete destitution. To grasp this word, we might compare it with another, '*penia*'. *Penia* refers to one who has the necessities, but nothing superfluous; '*ptwceia*' on the other hand describes the state of one who has nothing at all. Christ offers no criticism of this church. The saints were faithful in spite of suffering at the hands of their Jewish persecutors and I am sure they thought they were poor, but in contrast to Laodicea, which thought it was rich and was poor, these saints were rich. Rich in character and faithfulness and rich in the legacy of Kingdom honor.

Clearing up some misconceptions

Being a Christian and expecting worldly comfort is bad theology

And you don't always know where your oppression is going to come from. In Smyrna, the Jews were being persecuted because of the Christians. The Christians were standing up to the coercive power of the Romans. They were refusing to worship a man and they paid the price with imprisonment and having their property confiscated. The Romans didn't see any difference

between Jews and Christians so the Jews were getting persecuted as well. So Jews were turning in Christians to the Romans.

“Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life!”

Revelation 2:10b-11

. . . Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

Maybe we should finish with a Father’s day role model. It is not strength of arm or your loud voice, or even demanding your God given right for honor that will earn you honor. It is strength of character, doing the loving and faithful thing even when it costs you. Like Polycarp’s authority.



Polycarp was a disciple of John, this same author of Revelation. When John came out of exile to read this letter to the churches of Asia Minor, in Smyrna Polycarp was listening. You remember that the letter is written to the ‘angel’ of the church. That could mean the pastor and at this time it will most likely be that Polycarp was the intended recipient of this letter. Fifty years later, as the long time pastor of Smyrna, he watched as hundreds of his friends were taken to the lions in the coliseum, killed for being atheists, refusing to believe in the God of Rome. One day they ran out of Christians so they began looking for more. Church tradition tells us that the Jews were desperate to see Polycarp dead, so they turned him in. According to Ignatius, he died a martyr’s death for his faith. The following is from the Martyrdom of Polycarp, translated by J. B. Lightfoot:

9:3 But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, ‘Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile the Christ,’ Polycarp said, ‘Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?’

10:1 But on his persisting again and saying, ‘Swear by the genius of Caesar,’ he answered, ‘If you suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, you are ignorant of who I am. Hear plainly, I am a Christian. But if you would learn the doctrine of Christianity, assign a day and give me a hearing.’

11:1 Whereupon the proconsul said; ‘I have wild beasts here and I will throw you to them, unless you repent’ But he said, ‘Call for them: for the repentance from better to worse is a change not permitted to us; but it is a noble thing to repent from sin to righteousness.’

11:2 Then the proconsul said to him again, ‘I will command you to be consumed by fire, if you don’t fear wild beasts, unless you repent.’ But Polycarp said; ‘You threaten with a fire which burns for a season and after a little while is quenched: you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why delay? Come, do what you will.’

And so the ‘angel’ of Smyrna was killed but the church was not. Of all the cities sited in this Revelation account, only this little church had no criticism, and only this city still exists today. All the others fell and their churches with them. John Walvoord in his commentary The Revelation of Jesus Christ writes:

The faithfulness of Polycarp to the end seems to have characterized this church in Smyrna in its entire testimony and resulted in this church’s continuous faithful

witness for God after many others of the early churches had long lost their
...(1966, pp. 64-65).

A Father's Day Promise

Father, grandfather, some day father . . . strive for the authority of character, the authority of faithfulness. Leave the so called authority of coercion behind. No more demanding by force or responding in anger. Let your Spirit be that of the authority of love. A love that does not demand but dies instead. Do this, and I promise, you will leave a legacy of godliness that passes into eternity and the crown of life will be yours to lay at the feet of Christ.