

A Compromised Church

Rev. 2:12-17

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Pergamum was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. Geographically, it was located 55 miles north of Smyrna on top of a dome shaped hill rising some 1000 feet above sea level. It was an important city in the Roman Empire politically, religiously, and culturally. Pergamum was a distinctly Hellenistic city with a library that hosted over 200,000 parchments. As a religious center, it housed a great altar to Zeus and shrines to Athena, Dionysius, and Aesculapius, the god of healing and health. With such an emphasis on health it drew visitors from all over the world in the same way as do the Mayo Clinic in Minneapolis Saint Paul and MD Anderson hospital in Houston. Pergamum was also the center of the emperor cult in Asia having received permission to build a temple dedicated to the worship of Augustus and the goddess Roma in 29 B.C.

The Description of the Lord to this Church

The One who has the sharp two edged sword:

Jesus is seen in this message as one who holds the sharp two edged sword. This is the sword of power under the command of the One with greatest discernment leading to swift and sure judgment. This sword can divide bone from marrow and reveal the true motivations and intentions of the heart. Nothing is hidden from the one who holds this sword. His judgment is according to His Word. This alone is a warning to those who are compromising their faith. Jesus will come quickly and deal with them.

The Dispensational View

The Commendation

The situation is difficult but they are not without the presence of God. God is very familiar with the place where they live and identifies it also as the place where Satan lives. That arch enemy of God is well established in Pergamum. Perhaps Jesus is referring to the temple of Zeus and perhaps he is referring to the temple made for the emperor of Rome. Regardless, Satan has a stronghold in Pergamum and even comes there to reside.

Pergamum has been recognized as the beginning place of the martyrdom of the saints. Jesus refers to Antipas as being one who was killed due to his failure to offer incense and confess Caesar as Lord. Some legends say he was boiled in a brazen pot during the reign of Domitian. Jesus compliments their stand of faith during this period and their determination to hold fast only to the name of Jesus Christ.

The Condemnation

Pergamum receives a strong rebuke. A comparison is made to the teaching of Balaam during the period of the Exodus recorded in the Old Testament book of Numbers. The story line of Balaam begins in Numbers 22 and continues through chapter 31. The story begins by describing fear in the heart of Balak of Peor. The Israelites had scored an impressive military battle against the Amorites and were now living in that land. Balak was afraid they would do the same with his people the Midianites. He knew of Balaam to be a man of God and power. Balaam was summoned and asked three times to curse the Israelites. His continual response was that he could not curse what God was blessing. In reality, Balaam blessed the Israelites three times. So far so good.

According to Numbers 31:16, Balaam had “caused the sons of Israel” to sin against the Lord. The Midianite women had infiltrated the Israelites by seducing their men. This was strictly against God’s commands. When it came time for war with the Midianites, Moses made sure the men who had been seduced were slain as well as the women who had slept with them. Twenty-four thousand men were killed. God’s judgment was swift and severe. This was no doubt a demonstration of the seriousness of disobeying God’s commands. These men had compromised the security of their people and their spirituality by lowering their standards. The charges against some in the church at Pergamum were sexual immorality and eating meat sacrificed to idols. Evidently some belonging to the church had been having sexual relations with others who were holding to some of the other religious practices of Pergamum. Perhaps they were bowing down to worship Caesar or participating with some of the other pagan religions present. It is clear they were taking part in what we call religious pluralism. You will recall Jesus said you cannot serve two masters. He is the only true and living God and He shares His glory with no one.

Sexual immorality and eating the meat sacrificed to idols were both part of the pagan rituals. Earlier in Scripture Paul had dealt with the cleanliness of all things. It seems as though in this instance, the eating of the meat was part of religious practice which would have been spiritual infidelity on the part of any believer. “Balaam has become the prototype of all corrupt teachers who betrayed believers into fatal compromise with worldly ideologies (Mounce 1836).” Perhaps this is one of the greatest sins of our day among American believers.

Next the revelator brings in the Nicolaitans. The key to interpretation of verse 15 lies in the relationship of the phrase “in the same way”. Although the rendering is not completely clear, it seems the best application of the phrase is that it refers to one in the previous discussion, who was Balaam, and draws the comparison of his teaching to those of the Nicolaitans. The conclusion is that just as Balaam’s teaching nullified the moral requirements of the law, so did the teachings of the Nicolaitans. Some teachers even today, disregard the moral teachings of the law claiming to be free under the New Covenant of Grace. While in the New Covenant we are not seeking to satisfy the requirements of salvation by keeping the law, it remains as a school master and an identification of behavior that is against God. We call the kind of teaching that disregards the moral requirements of the law as antinomian.

This compromise came with worldly reward. Weirsbe explains it in this way, "Of course, this compromise made them welcome in the Roman guilds and protected them from Roman persecution, but it cost them their testimony and their crown. There was a price to pay for serving Christ and a reward to be gained. The choice was and is between the earthly reward the world has to offer and the heavenly reward of being true to Christ.

You will want to note the sharp contrast between the church at Pergamum and the church at Ephesus. They were given great praise for testing the teachings of those who came in the church. These two church messages find application in the modern church. We are to be careful about who is teaching and discipling the flock. It is not only permitted to hold teachers accountable, it is required.

The Challenge

God's full character of grace is revealed to the recipients of the letter. The message is clear; there is still time to gain God's favor. The action required is repentance. They simply were to stop this atrocious behavior. They were to stop their compromise with pagan ideologies and turn their hearts truly to serve God. If they fail to repent, God has promised to deal with them quickly according to the Word He has spoken.

As with the first three churches, a challenge is given for believers to hear, or to understand demonstrated by action, the words that were being given.

The Reward

The promise made to those who overcome the temptations provided by the Nicolaitans was for some of the hidden manna and a white stone. The hidden manna is no doubt the bread of life. You will recall that Jesus said "I am the bread of life (John 6:35). Manna was the bread which simply came down out of heaven to sustain the Israelites in their Exodus journey. The key is God's sustaining hand. That was their greatest need. When instructions were given to build the Ark of the Covenant to place inside the holy of holies, a piece of manna was to be hidden there. This life promised in Jesus Christ is hidden from those who are blinded to the truth of Jesus Christ. They are blinded by their own pride and sinful hearts.

The white stone is an unexplained symbol of Revelation. It is likely this stone represents something of the justice system and procedures of the Romans courts. A white stone would be put into a vessel by a judge to vote for someone's acquittal. It was also used as a ticket to admittance to a feast. Both would have spiritual application for believers. First, we have been declared righteous through faith in Christ. Second, we feast with Christ today and will feast with Him in glory (Weirsbe 551).