

Pergamum: The Compromising Church Revelation 2:12-17

Last year when I was in Kenya some of the guys teaching with me were swapping stories about crazy teaching that we've encountered in Africa.

- One brother explained an unforgettable moment after he finished teaching on **being faithful in marriage, and chastity in singleness, in a particular region of Africa**
- It was basic Christian teaching.
- A pastor came up and said:
"So I have seven wives, is that a problem?" He added, "I'm faithful ... to all seven."
- My friend responded, "Yes, you have lots of problems. **Even though that may be culturally acceptable, it's biblically unacceptable.**"

Now that sounds crazy to us, but it was very common where this pastor lived.

- Other stories included the **blending of witchcraft with Christianity; and mixing various elements of Islam with Christianity.**
- Several stories involved **sexually gross sins** that I won't mention, that had been **normalized in particular rural tribes.**

False teaching, and **syncretism** (the blending of beliefs) is **not just a problem for Africa.**

It's a problem for America, present in the "God of money" promoted in **prosperity teaching, and the toleration or even affirmation of various sexual sins in churches**

When sin gets normalized in the culture, it's very tempting to tolerate it in the church.

- Many Christians lack **boldness** to **withstand** such error.
- Others lack the theological **discernment** to **detect** error.
- This is a day of "sloppy agape" theology.

Welcome to the Church in Pergamum.

The church that was tolerating the **Nicaoliatans'** teaching...

Pergamum faced the challenges of the previous two churches: **Ephesus and Smyrna.**

- **Ephesus** was commended for **not tolerating false teaching. (2:6)**
- **Smyrna** was commended for **enduring persecution.**
- Some in Pergamum (the majority) were enduring persecution **but** others (a minority) were tolerating false teaching.
- **They let false teaching go unchecked — a kind of teaching that allowed for idolatry and sexual immorality.**
- **It was a disease that had to be cut out of the church for it to be healthy.**

The first two churches show us the importance of **love** in the church (Ephesus lost it, and Smyrna suffered because they had it). Pergamum and Thyatira show us the importance of **truth** in the church.

We must maintain both: love and truth.

We've considered the importance of love, and now the focus is in truth.

Christ wants his truth to be both preserved by the church and spread around the world through the church.

And this to be done in love.

We have observed how Satan attacks the church through persecution (Smyrna).

Here we find another method of Satan: seduction.

If Satan can't use persecution (Smyrna),

he may use seduction.

The devil doesn't care how you go wrong, as long as you go wrong (B Laughlin)

#1: The Authoritative Introduction (2:12)

¹² "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.'

Pergamum. It has been said that if Ephesus was the **New York** of Asia Minor, Pergamum was **Washington D.C.** It is 55 miles north of Smyrna.

Every traveler would have been astonished by the sight of this city, with all its temples and altars; the theatre, etc. Today the ruins are astonishing.

(pics)

The father Pliny called it "by far the most distinguished city in Asia [Minor]"

- Pergamum **was the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor.**
- It had **a library of 200,000 works** (second only to Alexandria, Egypt).
 - We get the name for *parchment* from *Pergament - writing on thin animal skins, rolled into pages and bound in codices.*
 - *Pergament was invented as a substitute for Papyrus, which wasn't being shipped from Egypt due to a rivalry between library in Egypt.*

It was a city **filled with idols and pagan religion.**

- There were temples devoted to **Dionysus, Athena, and Asclepius (the serpent god of healing/medicine, symbolized by a snake woven around a staff, still a symbol in medicine today.** Glen, one of the most famous physicians of the ancient world, was a native, and studied there. The city had all sorts of alternative medicines mud baths, a sacred spring, music therapy, and highly diluted poisons. **People came here in search of better health.** "Very cosmopolitan"
- The huge altar to **Zeus**, one of the wonders of the ancient world, was here in Pergamum.
- **The smell of burning animals permeated the city.**

Pergamum **was also a major center of worship of the emperor.**

- **There were three temples dedicated to the emperor.**
- It's one thing to love your **state and country**, but it's another to make it an idol.
 - **Sometimes patriotism crosses the line into idolatry.**

It was in this context that the church was to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

- In a context saturated with pagan idols and emperor worship.

But the problem in Pergamum is surprising:

The issue was actually not outside the church, but inside the church.

- They withstood the frontal assault, but Satan came through the back door.
- Some were **compromising** the truth, and participating in pagan immorality.

And notice how Christ is described: With **Judgment.**

“Christ standing over the church as a threatening judge because of the church’s sin is the thought pervading the entire epistle to Pergamum.” (G.K Beale)

Christ’s reference to the **sharp two-edged** sword proceeding from his mouth (drawn from the vision in **1:16**) **is a warning to the church for its failure to discipline false teachers.** If they don’t act accordingly, Jesus will intervene directly (**2:16**).

It is a warning to Rome and Pergamum to be sure – they may yield the sword on earth (Pergamum was given that rare right), but Jesus wields the ultimate sword in heaven.

- In persecution, Christian shouldn’t fear the State’s sword, but fear Jesus’ sword.

But the reference to the sword here is more directed at the internal issues in the church than the external forces around them.

- If they don’t act rightly, maintaining the purity of the church, then Jesus will bring the sword.

If they don’t do church discipline, Jesus will.

#2: The All-Knowing Evaluation (2:13-15)

Jesus commends some of them (the majority it seems) for being faithful in their witness, but also criticizes the church because some of them (the minority it seems) have compromised the truth.

A. Commendation (2:13)

¹³ “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”

Like Smyrna, Christ commends the church holding fast to his name.

- **Some were courageous witnesses** in the midst of such spiritual evil.

Jesus is aware of their context. **“I know where you dwell.” (13)**

- Notice the end of the verse, **“Where Satan dwells” (13b) (That’s not Cameroon Indoor Stadium!)**
- The other churches begins with a statement of their **“works”**
- Here, it is **“I know where you live/dwell.”**
- **It’s the context that is singled out.** It was the most difficult place to live faithfully.
- **But notice, they are NOT told to pack it up and move to Colorado Springs, or Wheaton, or Wake Forest!!!**

Satan’s Throne

This has been understood in a variety of ways:

1. **The acropolis, which looked like a throne.**
2. **A collective reference to all the idols, altars, shrines, and temples collectively.**
3. **The altar to Zeus, which dominated the city.**
4. **The cult of Asklepios. The serpent god of healing. People handled them and did all kinds of Cultic acts with the.**
5. **The imperial cult—worship of the state embodied in the emperor. They declared “Caesar is Lord”**

I take this as a summary reference to each of these (#2).

- **All of these are reasons collectively qualify it to be labeled “Satan’s throne.”**
- Pergamum **was obsessed with a love of the state.**
- **And it was filled with pagan idolatry.**
- Jesus knew of this hostile environment in which the Christians lived, and so he commends them for their **faithful witness.**
- **Some faithful followers realized that Christ’s throne is sovereign over Satan’s throne.**

Antipas

“Even in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness who was killed among you,” this church maintained its faithfulness.

- **At some point there had been a season of persecution.**
- Their faithful witness had resulted in the martyrdom of one of their own.
- **We know nothing about Antipas, other than that which is most important about a person – he was a follower of Jesus.**

Notice how Jesus eulogizes him... “my faithful witness” (or “martyr,” in the context).

- **Antipas is given the same title we read of Jesus in Revelation 1:5!**
- **His life reflected His Lord.**
- **No greater reward than this!**

Application

We’re reminded here that many Christians are living in very dangerous places.

- **It’s a big deal for them to meet weekly.**

- **Imagine if the message went out to our church, “One of our own has just been martyred, and there will be guards posted on front this Sunday, to see who still wants to worship Christ?”** What would the attendance be like this week?
 - It would be slimmer than the Sunday after Christmas.

Some of you may be called to lay down your life for the gospel.

- All of us will endure some measure of opposition.
- Remember, that Jesus knows.
- And he says “well done” to the person who stands boldly **for His name.**

This is our ultimate goal isn't it? **Faithfulness until death.**

- It may come through glorious **martyrdom.**
- But it may come through **a long obedience in the same direction.**

B. Correction (2:14-15)

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”

If Satan can't stop the church with **persecution,
he may use this tactic: **seduction.****

The church was harboring compromisers and Jesus warns them because he loves his church.

**Christ is grieved by the waywardness of this compromising minority,
and the nonchalant attitude of the unconcerned majority.**

What were these compromisers doing?

- They were not being discerning theologically.
- They were participating in idolatry.
- They were adopting the culture's immorality.

For some of them this could have stemmed from **economic** pressure; not compromising could have affected their ability to participate in the **trade guilds.**

- **Every trade guild had an idol, and there was meat given to eat after the sacrifices.**
- **There were priestesses who performed particular acts with their worshipers that were evil.**
- **To deny and reject idols in this city posed a problem **socially** and **economically.****
- **The entire city was built around idols.**
- You could be ostracized, marginalized, and even persecuted for rejecting them.

**So the Nicolaitans ride in and give you a way out of this dilemma.
They distort the gospel, giving you a theological way out.**

Today they would be called “open minded, progressive and tolerant”

- Perhaps no virtue is extolled like “tolerance” today.
- **But Jesus doesn’t applaud the tolerant; he threatens to bring the sword.**

Craig Keener stated that when teaching a college Sunday school class, it was the church in **Pergamum and Thyratira** that generated the most discussion among the seven churches, because students could identify with **the pressures of compromise in areas of sexuality, chemical addictions, accommodating to secular worldviews, and so on.**

14: Their immorality stemmed from bad theology.

Some at Pergamum held **“to the teaching of Balaam”**

- Balaam is used **symbolically. He is cited as a historical parallel.**
- We read about him in **Numbers 22 – 24.**
- **Moab’s King, Balak, is scared of the Israelites, so he tries to hire the prophet Balaam to curse Israel.**
- **But Balaam (who encounters an angel with a sword) said I can only give what the Lord gives me to say; and each time he speaks he only speaks blessing not cursing.**
- **But moved by greed (according to Jude 11 and 2 Peter 2:15) for the reward offered from Balak, he devised a different scheme that would result in Israel’s downfall.**
- **Instead of direct curse, Balaam suggested that Balak should have Moabite girls seduce the Israelite men to participate in idolatry and sexual immorality.**
- **Balak did, and the Israelite men did; and as a result God acted in judgment.**
- **God brought a curse and 24k died.**

And who instigated this rebellion?

Numbers 31:16

Behold, these, on Balaam’s advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD.

Balaam’s story served **as an illustration for the Nicolaitan’s actions....**

15: They were causing sexual and spiritual infidelity at Pergamum (see Rev. 2:6). And I assume they too were motivated by greed.

What did it involve? **They were saying, “It’s okay to take part in pagan sacrifices.”**

- **“Sexual immorality is no big deal.”**
- **They were pragmatic. They weren’t principle driven.**
- **They were compromisers, not people of conviction.**
- **Remember Corinthians? The issue is raised about whether or not it was okay to eat meat that was sold in the market that was brought from pagan sacrifices.**
- **Paul says that’s a conscious thing. Meat is nothing. An idol is nothing.**
- **But this is different. It involved eating at the feast.**

- **It was about participating with the pagans, being one with them as they did their cultic rituals.**

Perhaps the Nicolaitans were arguing along an antinomian line, a cheap grace teaching, the way we hear today:

- “Jesus has set us free – so go live it up that grace may abound”
- Romans 6 – By no means!
- You are free from sin, empowered to kill sin.

**Doctrine didn't really matter to some of them,
and ethics mattered even less.**

**Consequently, the church was losing her saltiness,
and so Jesus command them to repent...**

If we are just like the world, we have nothing to offer to the world.

Before we look at that command, let's pause and apply this.

5 **Applications.**

1. **A Call to Accountability.**

- **God holds the majority accountable here, not just the minority who held to it.**
- If you are part of the church, then you can't stand outside of it and critique it; you are part of it; you're an **insider not an outsider.**
- The NT is written primarily to churches, not individuals. And when individuals are being addressed (like Timothy and Titus) it is with the church in mind.
- Christianity is relational and corporate. Christians never exist in isolation.

2. **A Call to Doctrinal Preservation and Proclamation.**

- The best way to detect false teaching is by knowing true doctrine.
 - “same things church”
 - **Watch out for those dogs” (Silas);**
 - Nicolaitans were detecting false teaching
 - Don't make that teaching a pet, but recognize it is as wolf.
 - That's why we proclaim it.
 - **“God's way of overcoming error is the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, which is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes. Falsehood will not be suppressed by the gruesome methods of the inquisition, or by the burning of heretics at the stake, or by restrictive legislation. Ideas will not be overcome by force. Only truth can defeat error. The false ideologies of the world can be overthrown only by the superior ideology of Christ. We have no weapon other than this sword. We must use it fearlessly.” (Stott)**

3. **A Call to Discernment.**

What is culturally acceptable may not be biblically acceptable.

- Like the high places in Kings. Even the best kings couldn't seem to get that figured out.
- Like Slavery in the south — just blind to it, or too passive or afraid to address it.
- Like being overly patriotic, making Capitol Hill, not Calvary's Hill our ultimate hope.
- Like blending false, personal prosperity promises into discipleship. That's in Baptist churches not just TBN.
- What about sexual immorality?
- **The secular media, pop music and films, normalize sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, divorce, pornography and more.**
- **We have to teach our teenagers that being biblical is more important than being cool.**

4. A Call to Holiness.

- The doctrine of grace is never a license to sin. (Rom 6:1ff; 12:2; Jam 4:4, 1 Cor 6,10)
- **What did Paul tell the churches to do about idolatry, and immorality?**
 - Flee idolatry 10:14,
 - Flee immorality (6:18)
 - The one who advocated grace more than anyone said, "I beat my body to keep it under control"

5. A Call to a John 17 life and mission. (15-19)

- "I don't ask that you take them out of this world, but keep them from the evil one" (15)
- We must engage it.
 - Jeremiah said, "seek the welfare of the city," don't disengage.
- But Pergamum was not being "sanctified by the truth."
- Jesus gave us the model: **He was not isolated from sinners but he was separated from sin.**
- **If we are just like the world, we have nothing to offer the world.**

#3: The Appropriate Exhortation (2:16)

"Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth."

- The command is clear: **Repent**, or face judgment.
- **Not just the minority. But the majority who tolerated it.**
- No debate. No discussion. **Do it now: repent.**

This would involve not only confessing sin, but also to take the necessary action to remove those who were promoting the Nicolaitan teaching.

Warning

First, "I will come to you quickly" (NIV, "soon").

Second, "I will . . . War against them with the sword of My mouth" (see 1:16; 2:12).

"Sword of my mouth" (17)

The same Jesus who can judge the enemies outside the church is the same Jesus who can judge those inside the church.

The church today would be better served to stop trying to expecting unregenerate people look like Christians, and spend more time making Christian church look like Christ.

Christ warring against His church: Can you think of anything more sad and tragic than Jesus fighting the church!?

**The sword of Jesus is a comfort when we are persecuted;
But the sword is a terrifying threat when we tolerate false teaching.**

Antipas felt Rome's blade, but those tolerating idolatry was on the verge of feeling Jesus' blade!

How would this happen? We aren't told.

- Perhaps like Corinth – **“some of them died!”**

#4: Awe-Inspiring Conclusion (2:17)

This passage ends, not with a downer, but with a glorious promise...

If they repent and walk in faithfulness and holiness, then notice what Christ promises them [and us] ... a groom wooing his bride...

To the “Victor” – one who endures persecution and stays pure from false teaching and the immoral lifestyle associated with it.

A. He Will Nourish Us

He promises, **“hidden manna.”**

The Christians are being told that there's something better than the idolatrous food of Pergamum; namely the bread of life.

- In the wilderness, God provided every day except the Sabbath.
- Manna stands for God's sustaining provision.
- If we pursue holiness, then God will give you **this end time bread – Jesus himself.**
- We're reminded **here that holiness is always more satisfying than sin.**
- Christ nourishes **now when we pursue holiness, and he will nourish us forever.**

B. He Will Receive Us

“I will also give him a white stone.”

There are many possible meanings to this. Historically, a white stone was:

- **Given to Victors at games for entrance to banquets (cf. the messianic banquet);**
- **Used by jurors at trials to vote for acquittal.**
- **Given as a Ticket in special events**
- **Given as a Token of honorable discharge**
- **Was a Sign of initiation in Isclepious**
- **Used as an invitation to a feast**

- If we connect it to Manna, then it's best to take this to an admission into the feast. (Rev 7:9; 19:9)
- **Don't be enticed by godless feasts and idolatry that involves sexual sin; but realize that there's a better feast coming!**

C. He Will Identify With Us

- On the stone is a "new name . . . that no one knows except the one who receives it."
- **Pagan deities gave worshipers new names to signify new identities.**
- A new name associated with the Messiah and this Messianic feast.

Our identity and our futures are bound up with our union with Jesus Christ.

We anticipate it in the Lord's Supper.

This is the culmination of a glorious theme in the Bible: a meal, a feast.

- **Garden, Exodus, Promised Land, Jesus, the church, Lord's Supper, Feast.**

We will see him, and on that day we will not regret:

- Teaching sound doctrine;
- Pursuing personal and corporate holiness; and
- Maintaining a faithful witness in the midst of opposition.