

The Compromising Church: Pergamum

Revelation 2:12-17 ² "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ' These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: ¹³ "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. ¹⁶ 'Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. ¹⁷ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it." '

Once upon a time there was a hunter, who aimed his gun at a large bear, and ready to fire. But just then, the bear spoke in a soft, diplomatic voice: "Why resort to violence? Let's negotiate, and speak, I'm sure we can find some common ground. What is it that you want?" The hunter lowered the rifle, and said, "I would like a fur coat." The bear said, "Perfect. I think we can talk about this. All I want is a full stomach, I'm sure we can reach a compromise. So they sat down to talk it over. A little while later, the bear walked away, alone. The compromise had been successful, the bear had a full stomach, and the hunter had a fur coat.

Compromise is often like that. Instead of being a true give-and -take, the wrong kind of compromise is more like give-and-lose. One concession leads to another, and each concession makes the next one seem easier, and more tolerable.

When the curtain closes on Lot's life, we see a man having lost all, living in a cave, with his daughters getting him drunk so as to commit incest with him. That disgrace didn't happen overnight. It began after he chose the best part of the land, and began to pitch his tents toward Sodom. And then we find that he has become a temporary sojourner at the gates of Sodom. Then we find he has a house in Sodom, and his daughters have married with men from Sodom. Then we find he and his family are so attached to the place, they can barely leave.

Compromise is the boiling of the frog in the pot. You don't drop the frog in hot water, lest he jump out. The water is slowly heated up, and as he adjusts to it getting warmer and warmer, eventually it is hotter than he can survive in. Compromise is a gentle process of accommodating the world, and accommodating sin, and accommodating the enemy.

The third church that Jesus wrote to had fallen into that trap. Ephesus was the Cooling Church, Smyrna was the Crowned Church, but Pergamum was the Compromising Church. Here is a church which warns every church of every age, including ours.

I. The Commendation

And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ' These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: ¹³ "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

Jesus begins by commending this church, saying he knows them, and where they dwell. Where did they dwell? Pergamum was a city about 50 miles north of Smyrna. It was known for its massive library, over 200 000 volumes. It was also a very wealthy city, and a very religious city. They had several temples to several gods: Athenia and Dionysius. Their altar to Zeus was huge and shaped

like a throne. Pergamum was also the first city to set up a temple to worship the Roman emperor. This was a city steeped in paganism and the cult of emperor worship. And the Lord goes so far as to say that the church at Pergamum is living where Satan's throne is. What does that mean? We can take it at face value. Satan had chosen, at that time, to make this city his chief base of operations. Remember, Hell is not where Satan is enthroned, it is where he will be imprisoned. He walks to and fro on the Earth right now, and it may well be that certain places are so given overtly to his purposes and plans that they serve as the centre of his operations. That's what Pergamum was.

Perhaps it was their worship of Zeus, the god of gods, certainly a satanic figure. Perhaps it was their emperor worship. Perhaps though, it was their worship of the Asclepius. Asclepius was the god of healing, and was symbolised by a snake. Even today, on medical certificates, and often on the Hippocratic oath, you will see a snake coiled around a staff – that is the god Asclepius and Pergamum was known especially for its worship of Asclepius. The way you worshipped this god was to go to the temple of Asclepius, where all kinds of non-poisonous snakes slithered around the temple. You were to go in and sleep on the temple floor, and these snakes would slither over and supposedly then the power of Asclepius would come upon you through all these manifestations of him. Sounds like one more, like from the Old Serpent Himself, Satan.

So whether Satan's throne refers to emperor worship, or Zeus worship, or Asclepius worship, or all of them together, this was where this church was based. The Lord says he knows that. He knows their circumstances.

But He commends them because in spite of all this, they had not denied Christ. In a city where burning incense to Caesar was probably expected; in a city where you were considered normal and loyal only if you worshipped one or several of the pagan gods, these Christians came under fire. It came to the point of death for one of them named Antipas. We don't know anything more about this man, except that tradition tells us he was burnt to death in a hollowed-out brass bull.

But even under fire, this church did not disown Christ. They did not give in to pressure and say that Caesar is Lord. They did not agree that these false gods are also gods. They held fast, and it cost them.

Heb 3:14 For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end,

Heb 10:23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

But the real danger is very often not in the outright assaults on our faith, but in the subtle calls to join with the world. That's Christ's condemnation.

II. The Condemnation

⁴ *"But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.*

What is the doctrine of Balaam? You could really call it a doctrine of infiltration. You might remember Balaam. Balaam was a man with true prophetic powers. Balak, the king of Moab wanted to see Israel defeated. So he went to Balaam and tried to get Balaam to pronounce a curse on Israel. Three times he tried, and Balaam was unable to. Instead Balaam prophesied a kind of blessing on Israel. But that's not because Balaam wanted to. He wanted the money Balak offered him, it was

just that the prophetic utterance was not under his control. So Balaam found another way to get his money: he told Balak the secret to harming Israel. If Balak would send his Moabite women amongst the Israelites, and tempt them into sin and sinful intermarriage, and idolatrous feasts, then God would punish Israel. God Himself would chasten his own people, and so Balak would get some kind of curse on Israel. Balak did so, and that's exactly what happened. Israel intermarried, committed sin, and God judged thousands of them.

Balaam's sin was going after money, but Balaam's teaching, which is what we're concerned with here, was the teaching of infiltration. You want God's people disarmed, declawed, defeated? You don't go through the front door of calling them to deny their faith. You go in the back door of asking them to befriend the world, and be a part of their beliefs and ways, and slowly boil them to death.

Here in Pergamum, religion and every day civil life was so bound up together, they faced compromise at nearly every turn. Practically all the food in the city was first offered to idols. Paul had explained how to navigate this: if you're buying the food, or you're at a social engagement, then don't ask if this was dedicated to idols or not. Just eat it: the Earth is the Lord's and its fullness. But once someone tells you that the food was devoted to idols, then for the sake of the name of Christ in the eyes of that person, don't eat it, because the Earth is the Lord's and there's always another meal. But even knowing that, you can picture how often it came into social contact, and how often they faced it. And some in the church of Pergamum were teaching that it was fine to do so, it was fine to embrace the world, and endorse their beliefs, and place Christ on equal status with other gods. Maybe theirs was evangelism by infiltration - we'll win more people to Christ if we're like them. First we must get their respect and trust by doing what they do, and then win them over. But inevitably, who wins whom over?

And not only so, but actual intermarriage with pagans was a real problem. To be married into paganism was to be drawn into a world of evil, including all kinds of unspeakable evil done at the pagan temples. Again, some in Pergamum were endorsing this. Perhaps it was an ancient form of the idea we hear from young couples today, "I can win him to the Lord." "I'll be the influence that brings her to Christ." Not often, and most often the other way around.

See the amazing contrast. On the one hand, here is a church willing to die for the name of Christ. No budging when faced with "Are you a Christian?" But on the other hand, here is a church willing to hold hands with Christ's enemies. Here is a church warming up to the world, dropping her defences, making concessions to worldliness; maybe to get along, to get ahead, to smooth things over, to be more popular, to be less offensive, or maybe out of a misguided view of being more evangelistic.

As we look around, we see a church desperate to gain the world's favour. Churches gain their values from the world. The world says big is best and size shows success, so the church agrees and says, that's our goal. The world says the real aim of life is to be healthy and wealthy, and the church says, yes, that's the message we'll preach. The world says the really important people are the celebrities and media stars, and the church says, yes, we need a celebrity to endorse us or speak in our church, or interview us, and then we've arrived. The church gets its values from the world, its goals from the world, and even its methodology from the world. And since it is no different, it makes no difference. When you try to make the church feel like the world, don't be surprised when the world tells you that your church is irrelevant. Why should they bother with you if you offer them nothing different; no alternative to what they already know?

You see, the church was always meant to be in the world. We need to live in this world, and build

houses, and seek the peace of the city we live in, as God said to Jeremiah. We need to trade with people, provide services, earn money, buy and sell. We must meet with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. So far so good. Daniel and Nehemiah both served in pagan governments, but they did not compromise. Jesus ate in the homes of notorious sinners, but He did not compromise.

Compromise occurs, not simply when you interact with the world, but when you deny or sacrifice what you know to be true and pleasing to God for the sake of some other thing: gaining pleasure, or power, or fame, or fortune, or advancement, or popularity. Compromise is not being in the world, it is when you, by some choice, act as if you are of the world, playing for their team, agreeing with their world-view.

This was the teaching of Balaam: destroy them by a slow infiltration of the world into their midst. And it seems it was the teaching of the Nicolaitanes as well: to introduce moral error and compromise into their midst.

And be it a family or a church: tolerate sin and compromise and it grows. It spreads. The illustration the Bible uses is yeast. A tiny amount works its way through the whole loaf. So when we tolerate error, or moral failure, or worldly philosophies and values and ideas, those things don't just behave themselves and sit dormant in a corner. They spread, they infect and eventually, they achieve what the outright persecution could not: a destroying from within.

Think back on Israel's compromise with the Canaanites: what began as lukewarmness led to spiritual ignorance. That spiritual ignorance led to eventual apostasy.

It happened in the fourth century when the Roman emperor Constantine legalised Christianity and gave it favoured status. Suddenly all kinds of pagan days, pagan ceremonies, and pagan priests were married with Christianity, and the church was thoroughly compromised.

III. The Counsel and Caution

⁶ *'Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.*

Jesus warns the compromising church. He tells them to simply repent - turn away from this, call this behaviour sinful, depart from it, go the opposite way. Put off this old, and put on the new.

I think every Christian knows that this is crystal clear advice. If you've been dabbling in entertainment, saturated with worldly values and worldly sins, then stop allowing this to infiltrate your soul. Turn, and fill your heart and mind with what is true and good and beautiful. If you have been developing or cultivating a relationship or a friendship with an unbeliever that requires you to laugh at evil, or take Christ's name in vain, or act as if Christ is nothing to you, then turn. Make it lovingly clear to that person who comes first to you, and if they are still interested in being your friend, so be it. Every Christian who has left behind something in the world finds a far greater consolation in being sanctified, being made holier, and more like Christ.

This is how serious Christ is about this. He says, if you do not do this, I will come and fight against them with the sword of my mouth. Back in verse 11, this is how Christ identified himself.

These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword

The two edged sword is a sword that can cut two ways. This is what Christ's Word always does. It can harden and soften at the same time. It can condemn and console at the same time. It can

discomfort and comfort at the same time. The Word of God can come to a church, and condemn the unrepentant for their sin, and separate the repentant from their sin.

For the compromising church, Christ's Word will do this splitting work. It will reveal those, who through all the compromise are not even believers and yet are attending. It will convict those who are believers but are compromising. And so the sword will produce a divide within the church, which is sometimes necessary.

But the point is made, and it is fearful. To compromise is to invite a confrontation with Christ. He will come and discipline. His jealousy will demand that we be married to Him alone.

IV. The Challenge

¹⁷ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it." "

The challenge to the Christian who believes is a twofold promise. First, you'll be given hidden manna. Instead of the idol food, you will enjoy daily communion with Christ. In heaven, you will experience communion with God, as Jesus Himself is the Bread which surpasses the manna which Moses gave. In John 6, Jesus explained that He Himself was the bread from Heaven that will eternally satisfy hunger.

Then, He promises to give a white stone with a new name.

In the ancient world, this white stone had several uses. One, an ancient court of law - when defendants were condemned, they received a black stone with their name on it. If they were acquitted, they received a white stone. The white stone says, not guilty.

Second, in the ancient sports' contests, the winner often received a white stone as a symbol of victory.

And third, the white stone was often used as a kind of ticket to gain entrance to a special event, or if someone wanted to specifically welcome you, or invite you to his event, he gave you a white stone.

You know, when you think of why Christians compromise, isn't it because of fear? A fear that if you do not compromise, you will lose out; you will miss out on experiences, miss out on pleasures, be left on the shelf. A fear that you will be ashamed and rejected if you carry out a life of no compromise. You fear loss.

Jesus says – hold fast my faith, don't compromise, because you will not lose. You will actually win it all, you will achieve victory over what matters. He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Sometimes Christians compromise because they fear being rejected. They fear that if they do not compromise, they will not be invited to events, and not keep the same circles, and be excluded. Jesus says, don't compromise, overcome because you will have permanent access and a permanent welcome to the events that really matter – the society of Heaven. You will not be ashamed and rejected from the one group that ultimately matters – Heaven itself.

And this white stone which says accepted, victorious, and welcomed, will have your name written on it. In fact, it will be a special name.

I don't want to speculate too much here, but perhaps this means that each believer will be given a new name by Christ. That name will represent who you are to Him, and how He knows you uniquely. A name which sums you up and is His special name for you.

God hasn't been sparing in showing us characters that compromised, and characters who didn't. Compare Saul with Daniel. Compare Lot with Abraham. Compare Judas with John the Baptist. God says, trust me, the thing you want will not come about through compromise, but through commitment.