

## The Church That Compromises the Truth

Revelation 2:12-17

**Introduction:** 1) There is a very valuable lesson that the church of the Lord Jesus has struggled to understand throughout her history. That lesson: her greatest dangers are almost never from the outside. They are always on the inside. The enemy really is within. Our greatest threats to spiritual health and life are not opposition or even persecution from unbelieving, evil and wicked men energized by Satan. Rather, it is when we allow into our community of faith spiritual Trojan horses that will sow seeds of destruction given the opportunity. Now, this toxin is easy to identify with a simple word, the word compromise. Nothing will poison the body of Christ like the poison called compromise. And, the church cannot say it hasn't been warned. Listen to just a few of God's faithful servants:

- "Compromise has been a cancer in the church from its inception."  
David Levy
- "A new Decalogue has been adopted by the neo-Christians of our day, 'Thou shalt not disagree,' and a new set of Beatitudes too, 'Blessed are they that tolerate everything for they shall not be made accountable.'"  
A.W. Tozer
- "Truth always carries confrontation. Truth demands confrontation; loving confrontation nevertheless. If our reflex action is always accommodation of the centrality of the truth involved, there is something wrong."  
Francis Schaeffer



the emperor, and in 29 BC it was the first city in Asia to receive permission to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a living emperor. The church faced stiff and zealous opposition from without. However, her vulnerability resided on the inside. In this context the characterization of Christ is very instructive.

#### 1) The judgment of Jesus is true

John draws again from the vision of the glorified Christ in chapter one. There we read that “a sharp double-edged sword came from His mouth” (1:16; cf. 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21). The sword is the Word of God. Because it is God’s word it is true and trustworthy, inerrant and infallible. And here, it is coming from the mouth of Christ! His word is authoritative and sure. This idea is rooted in the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 11:4 where Messiah, “will discipline from His mouth.” This is a verbal announcement from the exalted Christ. “Anyone who has ears should listen” (v. 17).

#### 2) The judgment of Jesus is thorough

The sword is sharp and double-edged. It is not dull; it cuts quick and clean. Double-edged, it hurts and heals. It cuts and cures. This statement recalls Hebrews 4:12 where the Bible says, “For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart.” This sword of Christ conveys absolute authority,

decisive discernment. The Word of God is at once an instrument of life and an instrument of death. Interestingly Rome had given Pergamum the rare power to exercise capital punishment on its own. The symbol of this authority was the sword (Johnson, *BSC*, 47). They might wield the sword on earth, but the glorified Christ wielded a mightier sword from heaven. This is the sword the church should fear. This is the sword we should revere.

## **II. The church is commended for faithfulness                      2:13**

In a culture that is not hospitable to Christianity, opposition and persecution can make living for Christ hard. It can even be deadly. But be assured: Christ knows what we are facing. He is aware of our circumstances in intimate detail. This was the situation at Pergamum, and so our Lord commends them and seeks to comfort them.

### 1) We must be faithful where we live

- Jesus says, “I know...” If no one else knows what you are going through I do. “I know where you live,” where your home is. I know it is where “Satan’s throne is.” This is a striking phrase and has been variously understood: 1) From a distance the acropolis which on the plateau looks like a throne. 2) The idols, altars, shrines, and temples of Pergamum. 3) The altar to Zeus *soter* (meaning “savior”) on top of the mountain, a magnificent structure that dominated the city. The legs of the giants in the

sculpture were serpent's tails, and such a structure epitomized idolatry and paganism. 4) The cult of Asklepios. The symbol of Asklepios was a serpent, aligned with Satan in 12:9 and 20:2. Members of the cult called Asklepios "savior." 5) The imperial cult, worship of the state embodied in the emperor (Osborne, 141).

- The 5<sup>th</sup> view is the best in my judgment. This is the major problem behind Revelation as a whole and the core of Pergamum religion. Pergamum was obsessed with a love of the state. Patriotism had crossed the line into idolatry. To not line up enthusiastically with the preeminence and politics of the state was to fail to be a good citizen. You were dangerous and had to be opposed. Only Caesar is Lord, not your Christ. Follow Him if you want, but don't let your Christian convictions get in the way of your public duty to obey the government. Privatized faith is fine. Faith in the public square is not welcomed.
- Jesus knew the peril this placed them in, and He praises them for their faithfulness, that they "were holding on to His name and not denying their faith in Him." They maintained their witness to Jesus. They were faithful in their confession of "Christ is Lord" in Satan's kingdom!

2) We must be faithful in our witness

Smyrna could be described as a martyr's church (2:8-11). So could Pergamum. Jesus says you are holding (pre. tense) on to My name. You did not deny your faith in me where Satan's throne is...where Satan lives (repeated for emphasis, bracketing verse 13). In fact you maintained your fidelity to me even in very dark days, "even in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness who was killed among you."

- Their faithful witness had resulted in the martyrdom of one of their own: Antipas. We know nothing about him. Some speculate he may have been their pastor. A tradition says he was roasted inside a "brass bull" during the reign of Domitian (Mounce, 80).
- Note how Jesus describes Antipas: "my faithful witness" (better "martyr in the context). This is the exact same description that is applied to our Lord in Rev. 1:5! Christ was God's faithful witness unto death and Antipas was Jesus' faithful witness unto death! The Son honored His Father in death and Antipas honored his Lord in death.

It is happening right now somewhere in the world. Somewhere Christians are dying for Jesus. Christian women are being raped. Christian children are being sold into slavery. Christian brothers and sister are being imprisoned, persecuted, and tortured. In *The Global War on Christians* respected author

and journalist John Allen notes “80% of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed against Christians” (p. 33). These include:

Societal discrimination	Suppression of Christian missions
Institutional discrimination	Suppression of conversion to Christianity
Employment discrimination	Forced conversion from Christianity
Legal discrimination	Suppression of corporate worship
Violence against individual Christians	Community oppression ( <i>Global War</i> , 30-32).

When it comes to “body count,” “90% of all people killed on the basis of religious beliefs in the world today are Christians” (p. 44). Depending on who is counting, there are “100,000 to 150,000 new Christian martyrs every year” (p. 42). We must not forget these! And, we must remember:

Psalm 116:15, “The death of His faithful ones is valuable in the sight of the Lord.”

Revelation 14:13, “Then I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write: The dead who die in the Lord from now on are blessed.”

Philippians 1:21, “For me, living is Christ and dying is gain.”

### **III. The church is condemned for compromise                      2:14-15**

Many were faithful, some even to death. But this was not true of everyone.

Within this church a group of compromisers had appeared and the health and

vitality of the church was at stake. This element of the community said let’s go

along to get along. The church was now doing what the world would applaud. They were open minded, progressive, tolerant. They compromised, and Christ was not pleased. Two areas in particular were infected with this debilitating disease of compromise.

1) We must not compromise our morality            2:14

Some at Pergamum hold the name of Jesus. Some at Pergamum “hold to the teaching of “Balaam” (used symbolically).

- The story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22-25; 31:16. Note especially 25:1-3. Pagan food and pagan women led to spiritual compromise and adultery on the part of the people of God!
- “Stumbling block” (*scandalon*) refers both to 1) immorality and 2) idolatry. They celebrated the idols of the culture and adopted their sexual ethics. The two often go together.
- Compromise and accommodation were they identifying markers. They attempted to serve God but in the process allowed the prevailing cultural norms to shape both their thinking and their lifestyles. They had neglected the truth of Romans 12:2 which says, “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.” They had forgotten the warning of James 4:4 which says, “Adulteresses! Don’t you know that



friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the world's friend becomes God's enemy.”

- Pergamum means “thoroughly married.” Here was a church thoroughly married to the world. Satan could not defeat this church with a frontal assault from without, so he revised his strategy and fostered friendly accommodation from within, and with deadly success. They were a welcoming and affirming congregation to the sexually immoral. However, we must not compromise our morality. It will destroy our witness and invite the judgment of God.

## 2) We must not compromise our theology.

Some at Pergamum hold the name of Jesus.

Some at Pergamum hold the name of Balaam.

Some at Pergamum hold the name of the Nicolaitians.

We met the Nicolaitians at Ephesus in 2:6. The Ephesian church rejected them. The Pergamum church embraced them. The teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitians are closely related if not identical. Immorality and idolatry were distinctive characteristics of these false teachers as well. Theologically they were antinomians, libertarians. Doctrine mattered little and behavior mattered even less. With each passing day the distinction between the church and the world become more blurred and less clear. The lifestyle of one was

barely distinguishable from the other. Worldliness, compromise and tolerance had rushed into this church like a flood and she was on the verge of drowning. What an apt description of the Church in the Western world today! What a gross misunderstanding of grace and the gospel we suffer from today.

#### **IV. The church is corrected with a warning                      2:16**

Compromise is one of Satan's favorite and most effective weapons. Why is this so? 4 reasons:

- a) It never occurs quickly so you hardly notice the change.
- b) It always lowers the original standards you once held important.
- c) It is seldom offensive because it is perceived as loving.
- d) It eventually leads you to accept what you once rejected and even thought repulsive. It has been well said what one generation tolerates, the next generation will accept. What that generation accepts the next generation will celebrate.

What is the antidote, the cure? Jesus provides a 2-fold remedy that He sets before the church He loves and has set free from their sins by his blood (1:5).

##### 1) Christ warns us to repent

- The words of Christ are clear and direct: "Therefore repent" (imp). This is a word of command from the exalted and glorified Lord Jesus. Exhibit contrition of heart, confess your sin and change your ways (David Levy,

“The Church Compromised,” *Israel My Glory*, Dec. 94/Jan. 95, 21). It is time for a 180 degree turn. The imperative notes the urgency of the command. Do not delay. Do it now. There is no need or time to debate, dialogue or declare a moratorium on what God thinks and how we should respond. His Word is not up for discussion.

- Swindoll puts it well in what Christ expected of His church: “In concrete terms, Christ demanded that the Pergamum Christians amend their attitudes regarding the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans, that they take the necessary actions to remove those false teachings from their midst. The compromise had to end. Christ’s call for repentance included a warning for those who refused. If the faithful remnant refused to change their lackadaisical policies and if the wicked minority continued their libertine practices, Christ would discipline them. He would come swiftly, waging war against them with the double-edged sword – His just discipline as the righteous Judge.” (p. 54). These words lead us to our 2<sup>nd</sup> application:

## 2) Christ warns us of rejection

- A failure to repent would result in a swift and serious response from Christ. First, I will come to you quickly (*NIV*, “soon”). Second, “I will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (1:16; 2:12). Christ fighting His church: I can think of no sadder words in all the Bible as it

relates to the Christian community. Note that He says, “I will fight against them.” It was a group within the church He would deal with in judgment, not those who were faithful.

- The weapon of His war would be His Word, “the sword of My mouth.” His Word is the one certain source of eternal truth. His Word and only His Word set the standard for God’s people. Antipas, the faithful witness felt the sword of Rome. The compromisers in Pergamum will feel the sword of Christ! John MacArthur puts it well: “The church cannot tolerate evil in any form. To the boastful Corinthians, proudly tolerating a man guilty of incest, Paul wrote, “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened” (1 Cor. 5:6-7). Sinning believers should be made to feel miserable in the fellowship and worship of the church by being confronted powerfully with the Word of God. Neither is the goal of the church to provide an environment where unbelievers feel comfortable; it is to be a place where they can hear the truth and be convicted of their sins so as to be saved (Rom. 10:13-17). Gently (cf. 2 Tim. 2:24-26), lovingly, graciously, yet firmly, unbelievers need to be confronted with the reality of their sin and God’s gracious provision through the sacrificial death of

the Lord Jesus Christ. Error will never be suppressed by compromising with it. Today's nonconfrontive church is largely repeating the error of the Pergamum church on a grand scale, and faces the judgment of the Lord of the church." (p. 90).

**V. The church is challenged by its reward 2:17**

A three-fold challenge, or promise, is given to this church if they repent and endure in faithfulness to Christ and observe all that He has "commanded" (Matt. 28:20). Now, they need ears to "listen" (imp.). They need to remember it is the "Spirit of God" who is speaking. This is a word for this church and every church ("the churches").

1) Christ will nourish us

To the victor or overcomer (*ESV*, "the one who conquers"; see 1 John 5:4-5) He promises "hidden manna." Manna was the food supernaturally supplied to the Israelites during the Exodus and wilderness wanderings. Mounce notes, "The idea of hidden manna reflects a Jewish tradition that the pot of manna that was placed in the ark for a memorial to future generations (Exod. 16:32-34; cf. Heb. 9:4) was taken by Jeremiah at the time of the destruction of Solomon's temple (sixth century B.C.) and hidden underground in Mt. Nebo (2 Macc. 2:4-7)...in the context of the letter to Pergamum it alludes to the proper and heavenly food of spiritual Israel in contrast to the unclean

food supplied by the Balaamites. While the promise is primarily eschatological, it is not without immediate application for a persecuted people.” (p. 82). Jesus as the Good Shepherd, will graciously feed His people the spiritual food they need for eternal nourishment. After all, He is the true “Bread of Life” (John 6:35, 48-51).

## 2) Christ will receive us

Jesus says secondly thru the Spirit by the pen of John, “I will also give him a white stone.” The exact meaning and significance of the white stone is elusive. Mounce says there are a dozen or more possibilities (Ibid). Perhaps John was intentionally vague! Perhaps it was the stone of acquittal at a trial (verses the black stone of guilt and condemnation). Maybe it was the stone of acceptance or entrance when one presented themselves at a banquet.

Maybe there is a connection to a stone in the breastplate of the high priest or to the Urim (Ex. 28:30). Perhaps it symbolizes the victory of our faith in Christ (Beale, 252-53; Mounce 82-83). Bottomline: it points to acceptance and victory in Christ our High Priest, Christ our righteousness. He gives us the white stone. It is His gift never to be taken away.

## 3) Christ will acknowledge us

On the stone is a “new name...that no one knows except the one who receives it”. Beale has an excellent treatment of this (253-258) which I draw

from and summarize here: “The “new name written” on the stone confirms further the idea of an end-time supper in which intimate fellowship occurs. 3:12 reveals that the name in 2:17 is a pregnant reference to “the name of my God, the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, and my [Christ’s] new name,” which is written on the believer. They all refer to the intimate eschatological presence of God and Christ with his people, as expressed most clearly by 22:3-4: “the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall serve him; and they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (cf. 14:1-4).

Therefore, to receive the “new name” (2:17) is to receive Jesus’ victorious, kingly “name...no one knows except himself” (19:12-16). Nevertheless, he reveals and imparts it only to his people in an escalated manner at the end of each one’s life and fully at the conclusion of history (so 3:12). 2:17 and 19:12 seem to develop the similar thought from Luke 10:22: “all things have been given to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and to whomever the Son wills to reveal” (cf. also Luke 10:17).

In the ancient world and the Old Testament, to know someone’s name, especially that of God, often meant to enter into an intimate

relationship with that person and to share in the person's character or power.

To be given a new name was an indication of a new status.

Therefore, believers' reception of this name represents their final reward of consummate identification and unity with the intimate, end-time presence and power of Christ in his kingdom and under his sovereign authority.

[T]he "new name" is a mark of genuine membership in the community of the redeemed, without which entry into the eternal "city of God" is impossible. It stands in contrast to the satanic "name" that unbelievers receive, which identifies them with the character of the devil and with the ungodly "city of man."

### **Conclusion**

There are many points of application in this text. I want to highlight one that is particularly relevant in my context. There is always a grave danger in wedding God to government. The gospel and the government must always be kept distinct and separated. Further, it is lethal to the clarity and purity of the gospel to confuse it with national devotion and pride. Patriotic services may or may not have a place when the Bride of Christ gathers to worship her Bridegroom and King. This much is clear: if we become more moved and teary eyed over our flag and "America the Beautiful" than we do the cross of Christ and "Amazing Grace," something is



seriously wrong. Ultimately we must remind ourselves again and again that our hope is in Calvary's Hill not Capitol Hill. Remember: an idol is often a good thing turned into a God thing. There is nothing wrong with loving America. There is everything wrong in worshipping her, even if it is done unintentionally. There is no room for confusion or compromise here. Remember it is Christ and only Christ who says:

I will be your food now and in eternity.

I will be your entrance into heaven as your home.

I will give you my Name that can never be taken away.

What the culture, government and world offers in comparison doesn't compare does it? Hold on to His Name because He is holding on to you. Do not deny the faith because He will not deny you.