

The Church That Compromises the Truth (Revelation 2:12-17)

Introduction

What is the greatest danger the church faces? Is it Satan? Demons? Is it persecution? Opposition from wicked men? Is it the competition of other world religions? Is it the zealous proselytizing of the cults? No, the greatest danger to the church is none of these, enemies though they be. Actually our greatest danger is not found outside the church but inside the church. Furthermore, our greatest danger can be summed up in one word: **compromise**. Nothing will drain the energy and poison the lifeblood of the church like the toxin called compromise. Whether it is in the area of theology, morality or both, compromise is a cancer that left unchecked will eventually render the witness of a church null and void. This was the disease that infected the church at Pergamum, and no church, including this one, is immune from its attack.

Transition

How does Christ deal with His church that compromises the truth?

I. Christ is characterized by judgement. 2:12

A church that compromises needs a Christ who judges.

Angel – messenger, pastor

Write – (imperative) there is an urgency in the situation.

Pergamos – The official capital of Roman Asia Minor, though Ephesus & Smyrna also claimed the distinction. It had a library of 200,000 (second only to Alexandria, Egypt). Pliny called it “by far the most distinguished city in Asia [Minor].” It had temples dedicated to Dionysus, Athena, Asclepius (god of healing, symbolized by a serpent entwined around a staff) and Demeter. The great altar to Zeus, one of the 7 ancient wonders of the world was here. It was a city steeped in pagan religion.

It was a city joined at the hip to Rome. Pergamos was the official center for worship of the emperor. It boasted of 3 temples dedicated to 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 in Pergamos faced stiff and zealous opposition from without. However, her vulnerability resided from within. In this context the characterization of Christ is instructive.

1. The judgment of Jesus is true.

These things says He – He who is the truth incarnate (John 14:6) is the one who speaks to this church, to all the churches. The one who speaks is significant. His judgment is neither superficial nor biased. It is true and trustworthy, accurate and correct. For another to render judgment one might raise an objection. Not so with this judge, for His name is Jesus, and His evaluation of His church is always right on target, dead center.

2. The judgment of Jesus is thorough.

Has the sharp two-edged sword (cf. 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21) The sword is the word of God. In Hebrews 4:12 the Lord teaches us, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of the soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of

the heart.” The sword conveys absolute authority, decisive discernment invested with the power of life and death. The Word of God is at once an instrument of life and an instrument of death. Interestingly Rome had given Pergamos the rare power to exercise capital punishment on its own. The symbol of this authority was the sword. The city of Pergamos 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.

Transition

Christ is characterized by judgment.

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

As Christ walks in the midst of his churches He looks carefully to see what we are doing. He is honored by our taking a stand for His name. He is pleased when we love him even to the point of death. NEVER BE IN DOUBT: HE KNOWS WHAT IS HAPPENING. HE KNOWS WHAT WE ARE FACING. Two activities in particular receive his recommendation.

1. We must be faithful where we live.

I know (if no one else does, I do!) where you dwell (live, reside, to settle down permanently, where your home is) where the throne of Satan (adversary) is.

- 1) Altar to Zeus
- 2) Cult of Asklepios
- 3) Center of emperor worship in Asia (#3 is best)

Here was Satan’s home, his throne. Where they lived, he was lord. Where they resided, he reigned. Where they had settled, he was sovereign. It was hard, it was difficult, but they were faithful where they lived. The same must be true of us; Wherever Christ places us, may we be found faithful.

2. We must be faithful in our witness.

You hold fast (cont.) My name – they had not denied Jesus as Lord 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. Note several important truths in the text.

- Pergamos is where Satan’s throne is and where he dwells. This is repeated for emphasis and is parallel to “I know where you dwell.” Where you dwell, Satan dwells too.
- 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.
- Note how Jesus describes Antipas: my faithful martyr (better “witness”). 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.

Illustration

“It’s happening as you read these words. Somewhere a Christian is dying for his faith. Christian women are being raped. Christian children are being sold into slavery. It is happening to our own brothers and sisters – torture, imprisonment, harassment, starvation, to say nothing of banishment, family destruction, literature bans, and prohibition to meet as believers. In their shocking, up-to-date, well-documented book, *Their Blood Cries Out*, Paul Marshall and Lela Gilbert cite the following:

- In more than 60 countries, Christians are harassed, arrested, tortured or executed, specifically because of their faith.
- More than 600 million who take the name Christian live under political restrictions on religious liberty.
- Perhaps 225 million of those suffer “severe state interference in religion, obstruction, or harassment.”
- Quoting David B. Barrett’s *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Jan. 1996), it suggests the average rate of martyrdom at something close to 150,000 professing Christians per year! (“Who Cares When Saints Suffer?” J. B. Nicholson, Jr., *Uplook*, March 1999, 2).
- GROZNY, Chechnya (ABP) - - Spring 1999, Russian Baptist leaders have confirmed reports that Aleksandr Kulakov, 65, a Baptist pastor in Grozny, Chechnya, has been beheaded. His head was reportedly displayed in an open market area, and police invited church members to come to a public morgue in an effort to identify his body.

Elegy for a Jesus Freak

By Wendy Murray Zorba

“Not too long ago my 17-year-old son Ben came bounding into my room after youth group and announced, “When I die I want you to play the Supertones’ ‘Heaven’ at my memorial service.” My heart skipped a few beats. Then I said, “OK.” My son and I brought different assumptions to that moment. My assumption was: Parents are not supposed to bury their children. His assumption was: To serve the Lord means you think about your memorial service. This was a post-Columbine conversation. He and his brother Jon, 15, had also been reading the recently published book *Jesus Freaks*, by the Christian rock group dc Talk and The Voice of the Martyrs. The book, written for teens, highlights the martyrdoms of people from every corner of the globe, from the apostle Stephen up to Cassie Bernall. Jon was struck by the testimony of a young Russian named Ivan who served in the Soviet military at the age of 18 (in 1970). Ivan was forced to stand in sub-zero temperatures wearing his summer uniform for 12 nights in an attempt to make him renounce his Christianity. “A lark threatened with death for singing would still continue to sing. She cannot renounce her nature. Neither can we Christians,” Ivan said to his tormentors. The tactics intensified and by 1972, when he was 20, Ivan wrote his parents, “You will not see me anymore.” When Ivan’s body was returned to his family, he had been stabbed six times around the heart, with wounds on his head and around the mouth, and signs of beatings on the whole body. Ivan “died with difficulty,” his commander told the family. “He fought death, but he died a Christian.” In dc Talk’s popular song, “Jesus Freak,” the singers ask: *What would people think when they hear that I’m a Jesus Freak? What will people do when they*

find that it's true? I don't really care if they label me a Jesus Freak 'cause there ain't no disguising the truth.

Psalm 116:15, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints."

Rev. 14:13, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord."

Transition

We must be faithful in our witness.

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 crowd of compromisers had appeared and the health and vitality of the church was at stake. A group that said let's go along to get along had arisen and the church was doing what the world would applaud but Jesus would say is an abomination. They were tolerant. They compromised. Two areas in particular were infected with this debilitating disease.

1. We must not compromise our morality. 2:14

Some at Pergamos hold the name of Jesus. Some at Pergamos hold the doctrine of "Balaam" (used symbolically).

- The story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22-25; 31:16. Note 25:1-3. Pagan food and pagan women led to spiritual compromise and adultery!
- Stumbling block (*scandalon*) 1) immorality, 2) idolatry
- Compromise and accommodation: an attempt to serve God and live like the world. (cf. James 4:4)
- Vance Havner, "What we live is what we really believe. Everything else is just religious talk."
- Pergamos means "thoroughly married." Here was a church thoroughly married to the world. Satan could not defeat this church with a frontly assault from without, so he revised his strategy and fostered friendly accommodations from within, and with deadly success. We must not compromise our morality. It will destroy our witness and invite the judgement of God.

2. We must not compromise our theology.

Some at Pergamos hold the name of Jesus.

Some at Pergamos hold the name of Balaam.

Some at Pergamos 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 teachings 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 became 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.

Illustration

Grace without God

“*Amazing Grace* is a song about letting go, bottoming out, seeing the light, turning it over, trusting the universe, breathing in, breathing out, going with the flow; timing is everything, trust your instincts, don’t push the river, ease on down the road, get on your knees, let your guard down, drop your defenses, lighten up, like angels they know how to fly, don’t be afraid, when all else fails, pray; there are a million ways to say it. If we don’t, we crack up, break our heart.”

This is pop singer Judy Collins’ explanation of what the famous hymn really means (quoted in *Critique*, Apr 2000, page 15).

This is the way of Balaam.

This is the way of the Nicolaitians.

This is the way of a fool!

IV. The church is corrected by a warning. 2:16

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

- 1) It never occurs quickly so you hardly notice the change.
- 2) It always lowers the original standard you once held precious.
- 3) It is seldom offensive because it is perceived as loving.
- 4) It eventually leads you to accept what you once thought repulsive.

What is the antidote, the cure? Jesus provides a 2-fold remedy.

1. Christ warns us to repent.

Repent (aor. imp.) – involves 3 elements:

- 1) contrition of heart, 2) confession of sin, and 3) change in conduct.

It is a total reversal, an about-face, a 180 degree turn. The imperative denotes urgency! Don’t delay! Do it now!

2. Christ warns us of rejection.

- Come quickly – He will not wait. The time for waiting is over.
- Fight – Christ fighting His church. I can think of no sadder, more fearful, more tragic words.
- Them – it was a portion of the church, not all of it. Some were committed but some were compromisers.
- Sword of my mouth – His Word of truth in action. Antipas felt the sword of Rome, but Pergamos would meet the sword of Christ! They may compromise but Christ will not!

V. The church is challenged by a reward. 2:17

Hear – imperative churches – plural overcomes – cf. 1 John 5:4-5

1. Christ will nourish us.

Hidden manna – reflect a Jewish tradition that manna was placed in the ark of the covenant for a memorial to future generations (Ex. 16:32-34; Heb. 9:4). It speaks of the gracious provision of God in spiritually feeding his people. He who is the “bread

of life” (See John 6:35; cf. 48-51) says to us: Refuse the banquets of pagan gods and the world, and I will give you the manna of eternal life in my heavenly banquet and kingdom.

Transition

Live for me and not the world and I will take care of you.

2. Christ will receive us.

White stone – acquitted at a trial, acceptance into a banquet, assurance of favor from Christ. Jesus will receive us into His kingdom. Possession of the white stone assures us of this promise.

3. Christ will acknowledge us.

New name no one knows look to Rev. 19:12. It is not the name of the believer, but the name of Jesus! If we are true to Jesus, He gives us His name. It speaks of possession, protection, privilege.

Conclusion

When the world challenges us to compromise we should remember:

Christ says: I will be your food now and in eternity.

Christ says: I will be your entrance into heaven.

Christ says: I will give you my name forever.

What the world offers pales in comparison doesn't it! Compromise? No! Faithfulness? Yes, now and forever!

*Now I belong to Jesus,
Jesus belongs to me.
Not for the years of time alone,
But for eternity!*