

Christ Reformation Church

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Wise as Serpents – A Practical Theology of Evil

(Part 12 – Evil and the Road to
Rome)

February 28, 2016

Sermon Text: Revelation 2-3

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2-3

Introduction-

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men...(Mat 10:16-17)

I have been reading G.K. Beale's commentary on Revelation. I have benefitted much from Beale's writings because he consistently and carefully interprets Scripture against the "big picture" context of the history of redemption in Christ from Genesis to Revelation. This study of Scripture that steps back and relates a text to

God's overall plan of redemption and seeing how that particular Scripture fits into and contributes to that plan is called *biblical theology*. Biblical theology for example does things like looking for images of Eden in Revelation and then relating them to the original Eden to see just what message it is that comes from these very first images in Genesis recurring in Revelation. The message of course is that God is making all things right, creating a new creation like Eden and better than Eden and that everything in Scripture between Genesis and Revelation is a record of that plan being carried out.

I also like Beale because though he is a very precise and detailed theologian, he is careful to make practical application of his conclusions. Here is one about the church and it comes from his commentary on the second and third chapters of Revelation, the letters to the seven churches of Asia:

"The significance...here [in Rev 2-3] is to emphasize that the churches in Asia Minor are in serious trouble...in poor health. If the seven churches

represent the church universal of the first century and throughout the church age, then the significance...is to underscore that the church in any generation is typically not a healthy, witnessing church. Nevertheless *there is always a small part of the church which faithfully maintains its witness like Smyrna and Philadelphia.* This sober assessment of the church's overall condition matches what is said in 2 Timothy 1:15, though the evaluation there is even more negative. *Ministers of the gospel must be aware of such realistic evaluations of the church so that their calling is not destroyed when the triumphalist expectations of modern Christendom are not fulfilled.*" [NIGTC, The Book of Revelation, G.K. Beale, p 33]

Think very carefully on this. It is wisdom. What is the teaching and assumption of what Beale here calls "triumphalist expectations of modern Christendom"? I can tell you and you already know:

- A healthy church regularly sees conversions and baptisms
- A healthy church is a numerically growing church
- A healthy church is well thought of by the community
- A healthy church is a materially prospering church

- A healthy church is a non-judgmental church, accepting even the vilest sinner (even if unrepentant)
- A healthy church has a pastor who has advanced theological degrees, operates out of an impressive office surrounded with fine wood trim, impressive paintings, and an array of books behind his desk
- A healthy church's pastor is a popular figure in the denominational circles, preferably holding office there

Ministers of the gospel [and every Christian] must carefully compare Scripture's descriptions of a healthy church of Jesus Christ with all of these popular and completely unbiblical notions.

You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. (2Ti 1:15)

I have been in contact with an abuse victim recently who sought help from her church. All she has received is further abuse. When she appealed her case to a denominational official, he responded to her in anger, accusing her of being the real problem, and generally berating her. She has

witnesses to his actions, so this is no mere unsubstantiated gossip.

What she is facing is a huge virtual antichrist fortress that reminds me of some kind of religious mafia family. The big cheese head man of the denomination is a member of this official's own church (he is a pastor as well) and all their allies just keep voting them into office.

But when an oppressed woman comes to them for help – you see it's true nature. Always remember this truth about evil:

Evil craves power and control. Evil sees itself to be absolutely entitled to these things and parades as a sheep or even an angelic “son of righteousness” to get power and control. When you see these characteristics evidenced, be very sure that you are in the presence of evil.

Christ's true shepherds on the other hand, obey Christ's words:

But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your

slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
(Mat 20:25-28)

Precisely what then does evil look like as it operates in the local church, striving for power and control and self-glory? I think we can answer that question by looking at evil in the churches of Asia. As we do, keep this in mind:

Church history evidences a default movement of evil operating in the church toward a system very much like we see evidenced in the Roman Catholic “church.” That is to say, evil is always moving toward the establishment of a papacy, the installation of a “pope” figure, possessing virtually absolute power and control (even to the forgiveness or withholding of forgiveness for sins) over Christ's people. By “default” I mean that left to its own, left unopposed, EVERY church and denomination will certainly move to a sharing of the evil traits of Rome in which wicked people will certainly rise to power and adoration.

There really are two roads that the wicked follow to gain power. They appear to be different, but they head toward the very same destination of exaltation and glory for the wicked power brokers:

- The Pharisee road – rigid, legalistic, hypocritical, embracing a very wooden and unbending minute interpretation of Scripture, replacing Scripture with man’s traditions
- The Liberal road which denies the inerrancy of Scripture, denies the fundamental doctrines of the gospel and seemingly appears to be very non-judgmental and accepting.

Both of these routes however are quite the same. Their adherents travel them to arrive at power and control and self-worship at the expense of Christ’s flock. That is to say, you can visit either a very liberal or a very conservative assembly of people claiming the name “Christian,” and very often find power figures maneuvering for offices of power in the structure. And if you doubt it, just see how they respond to the plight of an oppressed person asking for help or to someone who is bold enough to ask questions about what they see happening.

Let’s look briefly then at the seven churches and what Christ, through the Apostle John, had to say to them:

1. The Church at Ephesus.

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'" (Rev 2:1-7)

What do we see here in Ephesus? First, notice an evil had come among them in the form of false apostles. To their credit and at the commendation of the Lord, the Ephesian believers had called these wolves out. To do so was costly in some way. It required “endurance” and a temptation to grow weary, but they had not. They had also

stood against another false group, the Nicolaitans, and hated their works. This also is to their commendation.

But when it came to evil arising within themselves, the Ephesians had not done so well. They had abandoned the love they had at first, they had fallen, and they were in need of repentance. There are different views on what this “first love” is.

- Many maintain that it is their love for one another and their love for Christ
- Others, like Beale, conclude that the Ephesians had failed to maintain a diligent witness of the gospel to the outside world.

If Beale is correct, then apart from repenting of their loss of first love, the Ephesian church would see Christ’s departure and it would become fertile ground for false apostles to creep in and establish themselves in power.

[You can see these themes connected in the Olivet Discourse, Matthew 24]-

"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And

because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Mat 24:9-14)

2. The Church at Smyrna

As Beale admonishes us, we must be certain that we are not drawn in to contemporary Christianity’s common “triumphalism” view of what a real, healthy church looks like. Ephesus looked very healthy in that church’s zealous guarding of the doctrine of the gospel. And yet even that church was in trouble.

So what does a healthy, genuine, Christ-honoring church look like? Smyrna is the real thing:

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you

the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.' (Rev 2:8-11)

What was happening at Smyrna? What did the community of the unsaved think of this church? What did their meeting place look like? Here are the answers:

- Tribulation (persecution for faithfulness to Christ)
- Poverty (probably one form of the persecution)
- Hatred from the local synagogue of Jews
- Imminent suffering, perhaps even of martyrdom

Listen to this description of the cost following Christ in such a place was:

The imperial cult [emperor worship] permeated virtually every aspect of city and often even village life in Asia Minor, so that individuals could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult. Citizens of both upper and lower classes were required by local law to sacrifice to the emperor on various special occasions, and sometimes even visitors and foreigners were invited to

do so. City officials were so dedicated to the cult that they even distributed money to citizens from public funds to pay for sacrifices to the emperor. It was almost impossible to have a share in a city's public life without also having a part in some aspect of the imperial cult. Pressure on Christians to conform to such participation would have increased during Domitian's reign. Those refusing to participate were seen as politically disloyal and unpatriotic and would be arrested and punished according to Roman law (exiled, put to death). But genuine Christians could never call anyone Lord except Christ. [Beale, p 240-41]

And here then we have a true church. A healthy church pronounced blessed by the Lord, led by genuine shepherds. Poor. Persecuted. Hated. Probably with a very small congregation. As time went along, other "churches" that compromised with the world would arise and appear to be "blessed." They too would persecute and slander such a church as Smyrna.

3. The Church at Pergamum

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. "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. 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. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.' (Rev 2:12-17)

In some ways I would suggest that this church at Pergamum is typical of what we find in conservative churches today that are at least on the road to Rome. Even in a church that so faithfully clung to Christ in times of terrible suffering and martyrdom there was an evil element that had been allowed to creep in and was still there. It is these Nicolaitans once again.

The city of Pergamum was a seat of numbers of pagan deity worship, one of which was symbolized by a serpent and became the official emblem of the

city. Even such a faithful church as this had allowed evil to creep in and be tolerated.

"The church is nevertheless indicted for harboring a group of compromisers, and the image of the sword is in this context primarily a symbol of threat to the church for not disciplining that group. The problem is the opposite of Ephesus. An overemphasis on internal doctrinal purity can lead to a lack of concern for the outside world. The Christians at Pergamum staunchly withstood external pressures to compromise from pagan governmental and religious authorities, but had permitted an apparently subtle form of compromise to develop internally.

...The episode from Numbers [Balaam and Balak] is applied to a group of false teachers in the church at Pergamum because a principle of theological continuity was discerned between the two situations. The false teachers were arguing that believers could have closer relationship with pagan culture, institutions, and religion than John thought proper....The focus here is on eating such food in the context of idolatrous worship....In particular what may be included are trade guild festivals involving celebration of patron deities through feasts and sometimes immoral

activities. Refusal to participate in such activities could result in economic and social ostracism. Therefore there was much pressure to compromise. And just as Israel was influenced to fornicate both sexually and spiritually, the same was true of Christians in Pergamum."[Beale, p 248-49]

In every church I have pastored, in four different towns, I have experienced this identical kind of pressure from these very kinds of wicked people who promote compromise with the world in order to gain popularity and economic gain and yet still claim to be Christians. "Come on, you need to join this or that civic club" even though those civic clubs were characterized by some distorted form of Christianity or were just plain rankly immoral, driven by greed for gain. The idea is to participate in those activities so that the reputation of the church would be favorable in the eyes of the world. Lodges are included here – secret societies that claim to be "of the Bible" and so on.

If the Nicolaitans are allowed to continue in that church, they will gain the power and control they desire and that church will become no church at all.

Just think carefully of all the many things that we are being pressured to participate in today so that people will like us and start coming to this church and we won't have to keep suffering. You can just imagine the many slanderings, innuendos, and the gossip in the town about that "stubborn, judgmental, foolish church at Pergamum" which may have contributed to their temptation to allow these wicked ones to continue in their midst.

We can go on now and see very similar avenues that evil was in these other churches of Asia, with just one exception, that of Philadelphia.

4. The Church at Thyatira

"I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. **But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.** I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will

strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. **But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan,** to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' (Rev 2:18-29)

Toleration of Jezebel. Sooo common today. Let me give you a very recent example of this from a person who claims to be a Christian. We posted it in a recent blog post and it appears here in the context of a godly person making true statements about evildoers. Then the ungodly "Christian" who like Jezebel would lead Christ's people astray comments:

Friend of the Victim: Just let me say one thing. A man of God will not abuse his wife. They are one if they are married. He would not abuse his wife

because she is part of him. If the abuse doesn't stop I would have to say good-bye. God doesn't want anyone to be abused.

Ally of the Abuser: You would be amazed at how many pastors in thriving ministries abuse their wives, are involved in pornography or other sexual sins. Men of God are not perfect. Attitudes such as yours make it all but impossible for these hurting men (and their wives) to openly get help. Been there, done that.

Friend of the Victim: A man who calls himself by the name of Christ and who is unrepentant of his sins against his wife, himself, and God, is not "a man of God."

And then our friend Pastor Sam Powell in California commented:

I continue to be astounded at these kinds of things. A "godly pastor who abuses his wife" is a lot like saying "a reprobate Christian" a "square circle", or "waterless water". It makes no sense.

Since Christians are the salt of the earth, it is no wonder that words have become meaningless in our society. Postmodernism isn't just something that "others" believe. *It started right in the church!*

If this statement is true: “a godly minister who abuses his wife,” then words have no meaning. If a man can self-identify as a Christian even though he has all the marks of the devil, then how can we protest if a man wants to self-identify as a woman? Isn't it the same thing?

But if we want to uphold reality, we have to say, “No; you are a man. You have all the parts of a man, and your self-identity is false.”

Don't we then also have to say, “No. You are not a godly man. You are not a Christian. You have all the parts of a son of Belial. Your self-identity is false”

The bible says that a reviler and a drunkard will not inherit eternal life. It can't say it any clearer. You can be one or the other. Christians inherit eternal life. Revilers do not. Therefore, revilers are not Christians. Pretty simple syllogism.

The same evil exists in these statements:

**He's working on his marriage
**He's trying to change

Ugh. Why are these statements acceptable? Would we use them with a murderer? “He's working on not

killing people.” He's working on not raping and pillaging. He's working on not robbing liquor stores and gunpoint. I once knew of a man who was confronted by his church for his adulterous relationship and he said, “Can I taper off?”

Why is this any different. You don't “work on not abusing your wife!” I can't believe I have to even write that!!!!

The fact is this: You are either a Christian or you are not. You are either a child of the devil or a child of God. You don't “work on it.” You either are or not!

In the words of Yoda, “There is no try. Do. Or do not.”

(I can't believe I just quoted Yoda. How sad is it that Yoda is wiser than so many church leaders!) I'm going to put this on my blog. Where's the Tylenol? I got myself right worked up!

5. The Church at Sardis

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. **“I know your works. You have the reputation of being**

alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. **Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.** The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' (Rev 3:1-6)

6. The Church at Philadelphia

"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. 'I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. **I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.** Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—

behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. **Because you have kept my word about patient endurance,** I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon. **Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.** The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' (Rev 3:7-13)

And then we come to this final church that is very nearly no church at all, Laodicea. I would have had to bold face every word here! There is no commendation from Christ for these people:

7. The Church at Laodicea

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. 'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are

lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'" (Rev 3:14-22)

Conclusion

I want to conclude by simply comparing the two faithful churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia) with the most unfaithful, Laodicea. Specifically I want to compare them in regard to their outer appearance and how the world and much of the professing Christian church today would evaluate them.

Smyrna – persecuted, impoverished materially, slandered by false churches, facing increased persecution.

Philadelphia – “little power,” faithful to Christ’s Word, slandered by false churches

Laodicea – fence-sitting lukewarm compromisers, wealthy materially, self-sufficient, comfortable, popular

Consider these pictures very, very carefully and compare them with what we see happening currently in so many local churches and other Christian organizations. Christ blesses what appears foolish to the world and repugnant to antichrist religion. He curses and threatens that which appears as wisdom and beauty to the world. The one that has power now is wretched and powerless in reality. The churches that are apparently powerless, yet faithful to Christ, are conquerors.

Evil will not be comfortable in the churches of Smyrna or Philadelphia. Laodicea on the other hand will be fertile, friendly soil to the wicked in their quest for power and control.