

“APOCALYPSE SOON”

“Pergamos: The Tolerant Church” (Revelation 2:12-17)

The next epistle was sent to the Church at Pergamos. This church was one that lived at the devil’s headquarters *“where Satan’s seat is.”* (v13). As a church it was characterised by its compromise as it was harbouring error. MacArthur comments,

“This church is beginning to be linked inseparably to the world. And this church has decided that it can maintain some kind of Christian credibility and also associate itself with the sins of the past. Pergamos is a picture of any church that courts the world, any church that marries paganism in any form. The church at Pergamos is a picture of any believer, any Christian who weds the world.

The city itself was about 55 miles north of Smyrna. It was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia Minor and was very wealthy and fashionable. Smyrna was also a centre of learning with its own university. It had one of the most famous libraries at that time with 200,000 volumes.

Pergamos was also famed for its idolatry. It was a regional centre of Emperor cult worship. Indeed, it was the first city to build a temple to Caesar. Another significant landmark was the hill behind the city, which rose steeply to over one thousand feet above the city. It had many pagan altars and temples. The most prominent on this acropolis was a 40 feet high throne shaped altar dedicated to the greatest of all Greek deities, Zeus.

So entrenched was idolatry at Pergamos that they even had their own localized god. This was Asclepias known as “Asclepios Soter” or “Asclepios Saviour” the god of healing, whose idol was in the form of a serpent entwined on a staff (this is still the symbol of the medical profession today). Historians record that worshippers came to the temple of Asclepias, where serpents would crawl down allowing the snakes to touch their bodies. It was thought that the touch of the serpents was the touch of the god, which would then impart healing power. The serpent was said to be their saviour. The devil always offers counterfeits to the real Saviour. Crowds flocked there from all over the empire for healing from disease. Interestingly, the devil is often symbolised as a serpent (2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9).

(1) THE COMMENDATION OF THIS CHURCH (v13)

Jesus Christ knows every detail of this church and the society in which they live. He introduces Himself this time as a judge, *“He which bath the sharp sword with two edges.”* (v12) In Revelation 1:16, John observed the same fact about Christ. This also reminds us of the description of the Word of God in Hebrews 4:12, *“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”* The Word of God with two edges can cut two ways. It can be at the same moment an instrument of salvation and also an instrument of death.

Ultimately, the Lord Jesus judges everything by the Word. Now the Saviour will demonstrate the use of this sword to the Church in Pergamos. They will feel the power of its sharp edges to cut through the wheat and tares co-existing among the Christians in Pergamos. This sword is truly the symbol of the discerning and ruling power of truth. It was far more to be feared than the sword of the Roman authorities in Pergamos. MacArthur believes, “It is the first

negative introduction of Christ because the Pergamum church faced imminent judgment.” Like their brethren in Smyrna, the believers in Pergamos faced persecution. In His message of commendation, the Master begins with a word of encouragement, “*I know*” (v13). The risen Lord knows certain facts about them:

(i) LOCATION – In Smyrna the church there faced opposition from the devil indirectly through the synagogue. But here at Pergamos the devil’s threat to them is not even veiled but direct as they are dwelling “*where Satan’s seat is.*” (v13) It seems that this place was the centre of his operations. They were witnessing behind enemy lines at the devil’s headquarters. Despite the threat, Christ commends their “*works*” there in that city. In such a place it is amazing that with such a hostile satanic presence that there was even a Christian witness at all. However, Christ’s power is always greater than the devil as He reminded, “*...I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*” (Matt. 16:18). It is comforting to note that Christ knows all about the location of our churches today. He knows everything about us - every trial, every pain, every tear, and He even knows our enemies.

(ii) LOYALTY - Christ also commends their loyalty to His **Person** for “*thou holdest fast my name*” (v13). This means that they refused to deny Him or accept that Caesar or Asclepias was Saviour. Despite the intimidation and appeal to conform they held firm on this issue. They were biblically correct even if this was not politically correct! The verb “*holdest*” is in the present continuous tense indicating they were still doing this. The fidelity and courage of these believers challenge us today, as so often we are intimidated into silence by far less of a threat. Yet, amidst the daily threat of the devil, they stood up for the Name of Christ. Another thing He commends them for was their loyalty to His **Precepts** for He says, “*and hast not denied my faith.*” (v13) Whatever truths taught by Christ in respect of discipleship they sought to live up to them. They did not run away, but daily took up their cross and followed after Him. Again, such a Church should make us think how we truly live up to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Are we daily taking up our Cross or is Christianity merely an incidental part of our life? Are there teachings of Christ that we do not want to apply to our lives?

(iii) LOSS – The church at Smyrna even had lost faithful members to persecution. Christ shows His knowledge and interest in His martyred children, “*in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth*” (v13). The name Antipas literally means “*against all,*” which may be an indication that this man stood against everything that was opposed to Christ. Little is known about Antipas, although his testimony must have been well known to the locals there. One church tradition is that he was martyred by being roasted to death inside a hollowed out brass bull.

Despite his obscurity, it is comforting to note the Lord knows Antipas’ name and his faithfulness. Indeed, the Greek word translated “martyr” is the same one that is translated “witness” in Revelation 1:5. So, Antipas has the honour of being like his Master as a “faithful martyr” or “faithful witness.” Precious in God’s sight is the death of His saints (Psalm 116:15). There is always a temptation to take the easy path of appeasement rather than the harder road of walking by faith. Too many of us are all too willing to compromise our faith when it costs us, even in small ways. Antipas is still a faithful witness to us.

(2) THE CONDEMNATION OF THIS CHURCH (v14-15)

The Lord sees much to commend this suffering and intimidated flock at Pergamos. They stood firm in their fidelity to Christ in the midst of such a great threat. There were some choice saints in their fellowship. However, the devil has other ways of attacking the work of God there. If intimidation did not overthrow them, then Satan tries compromise. Sometimes he comes as a roaring lion, other times he tries to join the church as a deceiving serpent or even as *“ministers of righteousness”* (2 Cor. 11:3, 15).

Christ is faithful to commend their faith, but He is also faithful to condemn their failure. He contrasts His commendation with, *“But I have a few things against thee.”* (v14) Christ selects two examples of the heresies being taught there. One group was tied up to the teachings of an Old Testament character called Balaam, whereas the other was tied into the teaching of a heretical group known as the Nicolaitanes. Whilst we do not know enough about the latter group to be sure of what they believed, we do know from the Scriptures what Balaam taught and did (Num. 22-25). In the book of Numbers we read that God forbade this hired prophet Balaam from cursing Israel directly. Rather than repent and humbly submit to the Will of God, this evil man sought a more subtle way of destroying Israel. He advised the king of Moab, Balak to seduce the Israelite men with Moabite women. Sadly, this devilish strategy was successful. This fornication led to idolatry and brought the judgment of God upon Israel (Num. 25:1-9; 31:16). So Balaam’s doctrine was a compromise related to idolatry and immorality.

Now a heretical group replicated the strategy of Balaam at Pergamos. They must have seduced some of the members into sexual and spiritual infidelity (v14). Said Christ, *“Thou hast there them”*. Probably this was through hiring preachers or teachers like Balaam who seduced some of the members to engage in the immorality widely practised at Pergamos in the idolatrous feasts. All of this was a clear violation of the counsel of Jerusalem in Acts 15. God had prevented Balaam from attacking them directly, but the false prophet had managed to cause Israel to stumble by a subtler error. The Church at Pergamos had withstood the assault of the devil by the front door, but had let him sneak in through the back door. Not everyone was as consistent as Antipas!

Sadly, today those propagating the doctrine of Balaam have invaded the church. Many compromise with the world in order to advance themselves within and without the church. They do not want to be disliked by the world nor do they want to carry the cross of shame that a holy separated life requires. Antinomianism is popular with people today who argue because they are free in Christ that grace covers any sin they want to indulge in. Sin and worldliness has infected many churches. Many professing Christians in our modern world seem to be utterly oblivious to these enemies. Sensual “Delilah’s” dance on the platform leading the singing; adulterers and sodomites are placed in the pulpit and Session. Unbelievers should feel convicted and aliens in the holy atmosphere of a godly separated church. The church is never meant to be a place where unbelievers feel comfortable and welcome to join. Indeed, there are many churches today that deliberately strategize to make their churches comfortable for unbelievers. They boast that they are “seeker sensitive.” Many will not dare to propagate false doctrine but instead throw stumbling blocks in the way of other saints. They want the best of both worlds. Have you been stumbling others by your compromise with sin? As Horatius Bonar once said, *“I looked for the church I found it in the world, I looked for the world I found it in the church.”*

(3) THE COUNSEL TO THIS CHURCH (v16)

Just as He did in Ephesus, the Lord offers counsel to deal with this false charity. The Saviour not only exposes our failures but meets the need also. He calls upon the entire church here to “repent,” either of practising this heresy or using expediency to tolerate it. The verb “repent” is an imperative in the Greek text demonstrating the element of urgency and the sinfulness of their accommodation. The judge’s arrival is imminent or “quickly” if they do not repent. This repentance would definitely include practising Church discipline and exercising biblical separation. The type of sin must be confronted directly as Paul instructed, “...*Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened....But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person*”. (1 Cor. 5:6-7, 11-13).

It should be noted that the Lord is not indifferent to it. Jesus Christ is intolerant of the tolerance of sin. He does not use grace to excuse or cover up this sin. Nor does He say, “doctrine divides, love unites.” Indeed, He threatens that, “*Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth*” (v16). Every church that compromises needs to be warned that there is the eternal Word of God whose standards change not. This two-edged sword of the Word of God has an edge of comfort or peace but also the double edge of judgment. This coming is not His Second Coming, but to a special judgment upon this church, as God did with Balaam (Num. 22:23, 31; 25:5; 31:8). When the Corinthian church refused to deal with sin in their midst, the consequence was sickness and even death (1 Cor. 11:30). The Lord praised the Church at Ephesus because they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitanes but the church at Pergamos did not emulate this example. So, either the church at Pergamos deals with the sin or Christ will deal with this Church, “*For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged*”. (1 Cor. 11:31). As Morgan observed,

“What an inference of love lies behind this threat. It is as though the Lord would say ‘Discipline these people, for the judgment will be swift and heavy if they are not excluded.’ For the sake of the men that hold pernicious doctrine, they should be excluded from the church. There are men in the borders of our churches to whom we are doing incalculable harm by allowing them to remain there. We allow them to remain, and they imagine that they are in a place of safety when they are in the place of death. We are sometimes inclined to treat this warning as though it were not alarming, but I want to say that it is one of the most solemn in all these epistles. It is a warning that the Lord Jesus will come, and by exercise of righteous judgment, will remove what the church itself refuses to remove.”

It may well be that Christ did come and dealt personally with the Nicolaitanes, as there is no reference to such a sect extending beyond the early church.

The Lord extends promises to those who “overcometh” the doctrine and practices of Balaam and the Nicolaitanes at Pergamos. Those who persevere in their faith at Pergamos will enjoy the blessing of “hidden manna” and be presented with a “white stone” which has “a new name written”. (v17) What these exactly refer to has been the subject of much conjecture. With respect to the “hidden manna”, Christ is likely referring to the spiritual manna of Himself, which is eternal and not temporal like physical food. While believers partake somewhat now of this, in glory they shall enjoy a greater manifestation of the Saviour. Unbelievers, by contrast, cannot partake of this

as it is hidden to them. This is the thought He expressed in John 6:48-51, *"I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."* There is endless speculation as to what this "white stone" is. In the ancient world, the use of a white stone was used in many differing contexts. The one thing that can be ascertained certainly is that it is an assured means of entry into glory with Christ for those believers who overcome the assault of the world on their lives. It is like our boarding pass reserved and waiting for us to pick up. This "new name" is likely either the name of God (cf. 3:12) or the believer. It certainly shows that we are not some impersonal number, but we are personally known and named by a loving Father.

CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note that a church can be faithful in the midst of such awful conditions, yet still harbour error. Even with great examples such as Antipas, a church can still tolerate doctrinal heresy to creep in and fester in its midst. It was not that the whole church held to these false doctrines, but that they tolerated them. It could well be that because of the intensity of the persecution that they felt that they needed to be as united as possible. Or it may be that they felt they did not have time to deal with this issue, as they were fighting every day to just continue in existence. However, Luther wisely warned, "It is better to be divided by truth than to be united in error."

The grave danger to this church was not from persecution from without, but from tolerating error within. This condemnation and counsel by Christ to the saints at Pergamos is especially helpful for us today, as we live in an age of ecclesiastical compromise and tolerance of sin. A theological fog has descended on most of Christendom and confusion abounds. This letter to the Church at Pergamos reminds us in our church that we are not just to be concerned about our own orthodoxy, but also those who are in fellowship with us. It is not enough to simply believe the gospel but we must defend it also. When false disciples and false doctrine enter our churches, we cannot just bury our heads in the sand and hope that it goes away. You cannot overcome error by compromising with it. It is no sin to hate what Christ hates (v16). Truth cannot be sold off at the expense of unity as Tozer warned, "Truth is slain to provide a feast to celebrate the marriage of heaven and hell, and all to support a concept of unity which has no basis in the Word of God."

No one likes to be accused of being schismatic or too narrow-minded. As someone once said, "To avoid criticism do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing." However, indifference even by the majority to the sins of a minority is noticed and displeases the Risen Lord. Yes, we are to try and evangelise the lost by love, but it is not loving to accommodate the depraved and the wicked in the membership of the fellowship. If we accommodate error then the Lord will inevitably come and make war with us. Do we have ears to hear?