

THE LETTER TO PERGAMUM: “COMPROMISE”

Revelation 2:12-17

Last Sunday we visited the First Christian Church of Philadelphia; a small, loyal group of believers being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ. Today, we travel to Pergamum and meet a Christian congregation in danger of compromise.

First, the city of Pergamum. Pergamum was located in the Caicus River Valley, forty-five miles northeast of Smyrna and fifteen miles from the Aegean Sea. As an inland city, Pergamum had no harbor and was not known for trade. Yet, what the city lacked in commerce it gained in prestige and political power.

Had there been a Chamber of Commerce in Pergamum, it would have promoted the city as the CAPITOL OF ASIA and FINEST MEDICAL CARE ANYWHERE and WORLD-FAMOUS LIBRARY and BIRTHPLACE OF THE PHYSICIAN GALEN. Had there been a church directory posted at Pergamum City Limits, it would have read in alphabetical order: Temple of Asclepius, Temple of Athena, Temple of Caesar, Temple of Demeter, Temple of Dionysus, Temple of Hera, Temple of Serapis, Temple of Zeus. There would have been no mention of the small Christian church meeting in private homes.

Pergamum was a split-level city, built at the top and bottom of a high mesa towering 1,000' above a fertile plain. The upper city or acropolis contained shrines and temples, that world-famous library, and one of the steepest amphitheaters in Asia Minor. The lower city held even more temples; a 10,000-seat sports stadium; a gymnasium, racetrack, communal baths, massive marketplace, multiple businesses, and private residences. The road connecting upper and lower Pergamum was lined with columns and called The Sacred Way.

At a time in history when all books were written and copied by hand, the library in Pergamum owned 200,000 volumes. Only the library in Alexandria, Egypt was larger. And this led to an intense rivalry between the two cities and two libraries. On one occasion, Pergamum attempted to hire the chief librarian of Alexandria. Rather than to lose his prized librarian, the ruler of Alexandria imprisoned him. To punish Pergamum, the ruler halted all shipments of papyrus. Papyrus was needed to make paper. Paper was needed to write books. Books were needed to have libraries. Yet, not to be outdone, Pergamum developed its own writing material from calf skin. The material was called *parchment*, from the Greek word PERGAMENON, meaning simply “from Pergamum”.

And Pergamum really did offer the finest medical care anywhere. The Asklepiion, named for Asclepius, the god of healing, was both a temple and a hospital with wards, rooms, beds, spas, priests, pharmacies, and medical schools—an ancient version of the Mayo Clinic, where people worldwide came to be healed, including Roman emperors. A sign posted at the

entrance of the Asklepiion read: DEATH IS NOT PERMITTED HERE. A nice thought. Only, the intent was not to give the terminally-ill hope, but to keep the terminally-ill out. The priests realized that death was not good for a hospital's business or reputation.

The symbol of the god Asclepius was a serpent. Nonpoisonous snakes were permitted to slither freely about the hospital. In fact, in the darkness of night, every patient hoped to be touched by a snake, believing the touch of a snake was the healing touch of Asclepius himself. And to this very day, the serpent of Asclepius is the emblem of the American Medical Association. Pergamum was also the birthplace of the physician Galen, second only in medical importance to the famed Hippocrates. Galen's medical observations were so astute that they were taught in medical schools for fourteen centuries following his death in 200 A.D.

This, then, was Pergamum. A bustling, cosmopolitan city. A seat of Roman power and Roman policies. A combination of arts and architecture, magic and medicine, pagan temples and pagan gods. And somewhere in this metropolis of nearly 200,000 people was a small Christian congregation.

Second, the church in Pergamum. Actually, we know nothing about the founding of the Pergamum church; the WHO or the WHEN. Paul may have founded this congregation when traveling through Mysia, Acts 16; the region in which Pergamum was located. Or Paul may have visited Pergamum during the three years he spent in Ephesus—a journey of only seventy-five miles. And if not Paul, perhaps the founder was the Apostle John or the orator Apollos or the husband-and-wife missionaries Aquilla and Priscilla or Christians from other local churches or even converts returning to Asia Minor after the First Pentecost. We don't know because we're not told.

All we really know about the First Christian Church of Pergamum is provided by Christ's letter in Revelation 2:12-17. And based on that letter, this church was in danger of compromise; of compromising truth with error; of compromising holy living with godless behavior. Said differently, Pergamum was a place where Christians went to church on Sunday and reveled in pagan temples on Monday. So, how did Jesus address this important matter?

Third, the content of Christ's letter to Pergamum. Each of the seven churches in Asia Minor faced a particular problem. Accordingly, in each of His letters to the seven churches Jesus introduced Himself in a particular way.

For example, when confronting the loss of first-love in Ephesus, Jesus introduced Himself as the God who is intimately and lovingly involved in all of His churches; upholding their pastors; constantly walking back and forth amid the pews and people. As He loved them. they were to love each other. Likewise, when confronting suffering in Smyrna, Jesus introduced Himself as the God who fully understands suffering. He is, after all, the God **“who died and came to life again,”** Revelation 2:8. Or when confronting the little strength in

Philadelphia, Jesus introduced Himself as the God who opens and closes doors. He opens, not us. He closes, not us. Amid our weakness, He reveals His strength.

How then did Jesus introduce Himself to the compromising church in Pergamum? He said first, **“These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword,”** Revelation 2:12. And here the Greek is far more emphatic than the English—literally, ‘the sword, the double-edged one, the sharp one.’ An emphasis on each of this sword’s characteristics. Four verses later Jesus referred to **“the sword of My mouth.”** The same imagery is found in Revelation 1:16, **“Out of His mouth came a sharp doubled-edged sword.”** And finally in Revelation 19:15, **“Out of His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.”**

You and I need not be first-century Christians or familiar with Roman swords to understand the rich meaning of this symbolism. A sword is a weapon, a symbol of authority and judgment, a means to defend and to destroy. According to Jesus, His sword is SHARP, able to cut through any opposition. His sword is DOUBLE-EDGED, suitable for any direction and any application. His sword emanates from His mouth.

And therefore His sword is the very word of God and wielding all the power of God. It is the weapon of God against which no foe, no argument, no compromise, and no false teaching can stand. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:12, **“Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”** Or as Luther wrote centuries after Paul in his great Reformation hymn—referring to overcoming the devil: “One little word can fell him.” That seemingly little word is the almighty word of God.

The author of Hebrews said: **“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any doubled-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account,”** Hebrews 4:12.

Can you think of a better way for Jesus to introduce Himself to a church compromising the truth of Scripture? Can you think of a better way for Jesus to reveal Himself to us as we face trials of many kinds—sicknesses, financial difficulties, marital troubles, addictions, increasing government opposition, or the challenges of a congregational ministry? No. From the outset of His letter Jesus told the Christians in Pergamum, as He tells the Christians in Lemmon: “The way to victory is through My word.” And oh, that each of us would view the word of God in this way; as the weapon by which to overcome and to slay all woes and worries, all trials and temptations, instead of something to hear on Sunday and forget by Monday.

Next, Jesus said, **“I know;”** those two precious words of awareness and understanding and personal involvement that He wrote to all seven churches in all seven letters; and words

that He still speaks to every Christian congregation and every Christian individual. “I know. I know your situation. I know your heartache. I know your temptations.” And it is because Jesus does know that His churches and His people have no reason for despair and no reason to compromise. If He knows, He will act. When He acts, it will be in exactly the right way, at the right time, through the right means.

Jesus certainly knew the circumstances in Pergamum. **“I know where you live,”** He said, **“where Satan has his throne,”** Revelation 2:13. And He added at the conclusion of the verse: **“where Satan lives.”** A throne represents a seat of power. And there were several aspects of Pergamum that made it uniquely qualified to be called a throne of Satan.

To begin with, Pergamum was the Roman capitol of Asia; a seat of Roman power. A city in which there were not one, not two, but three temples dedicated to the worship of Roman emperors. Failure to worship the Roman emperor as *Dominus et Deus*, as Lord and God, resulted in a charge of treason, imprisonment, and even death. This is likely what happened to the “Antipas” Jesus mentioned in His letter: **“...in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness, who was put to death in your city,”** Revelation 2:13. Obviously, Antipas was a man who refused to compromise God’s truth.

Pergamum was also filled with pagan temples. And one of these temples was a center of worship for the god Asclepius. In fact, the official title of this god was *Asclepius Soter*, which means “Asclepius Savior”. Christians know of but one Savior; the one who said, **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me,”** John 14:6. Furthermore, the symbol of Asclepius was a—what? A serpent; the very form Satan took when he first appeared in human history.

Additionally, the acropolis of Pergamum contained The Altar of Zeus; its marble structure gleaming and visible for miles before reaching Pergamum. It was also one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Excavated in the 1870s, the altar was moved in the 1930s to the Pergamum Museum in Berlin, Germany; where it became an inspiration to Adolf Hitler. What does the Altar of Zeus resemble? Of all things, a seat with two armrests. In other words, a throne. Add billowing black smoke from sacrifices, and the result is a frightening image of a satanic throne.

Regardless of the exact meaning of the phrase **“where Satan has his throne,”** Satan clearly had a strong presence in Pergamum. When others may have dismissed the small Christian church in town, Satan took notice and attempted to eliminate it. His first ploy was persecution; and when that failed—in the words of Jesus, **“You did not renounce your faith in Me”**—Satan used another method, namely, compromise. And throughout history, Satan has always been more effective in attacking the Christian Church from within than from without, with error instead of with persecution.

This was happening to the church in Pergamum. **“Nevertheless,”** said Jesus, **“I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”** The problem in the Pergamum church was not only that some members were compromising Scripture, but that other members were tolerating it. “Nothing to worry about.”

On December 7, 1941, three hundred and fifty-three Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Lost were eight battleships, six airfields, almost all U.S. planes, and 2,400 American lives. The attack was deadly and unannounced. But it was not unforeseen. In fact, when the Japanese planes were still one hundred and thirty-seven miles away, two U.S. soldiers at a remote radar station in the Pacific Ocean noticed alarming images on their radar screens. First, a few blips. Then, blips filling the screens. They immediately notified the only officer on duty that Sunday; a young, inexperienced lieutenant, who, thinking the planes were American planes from California said, “Don’t worry about it.” The rest is history.

And so it was in Pergamum. Compromise. Church on Sunday. Pagan temples on Monday. Christians observing the situation and saying, “Don’t worry about it.” And this in striking contrast to the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 6: **“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?”**

The Savior’s reference to Balaam and Balak is from an account in the Old Testament Book of Numbers. Balaam, a greedy prophet, was hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the Israelites. However, each time Balaam opened his mouth to curse, God turned his words into a blessing. So, Balaam suggested that Balak try another approach; that he use Moabite women to seduce Israelite men to sexual immorality, and then seduce them to idolatry.

And it worked; as recorded in Numbers 25: **“While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices of their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the Lord’s anger burned against them.”** What cursing could not accomplish, comprising did. As a result of God’s fierce anger, some 24,000 Israelites died in a plague. And the moral of the story? Never believe that a “little compromise” of Scripture or godly behavior is nothing to worry about. No big deal.” To Jesus Christ, it was a big deal—the reason why He addressed it so forcefully in His letter to the church in Pergamum.

Dear friends, not all compromise is wrong. In some venues, compromise is good,

welcome, beneficial—like international peace treaties or passing government legislation; or like settling on which price to pay, which vacation to take, and whose turn it is to operate the TV remote control. But when it comes to the word and will of Almighty God, there is simply no room, no reason, and no right for compromise. None.

Yet, comprising values and truths is not only evident in our nation; it is sadly evident within Christians churches—churches no different from the one in Pergamum. Churches compromising the truth of Scripture. Churches compromising creation with evolution. Churches compromising God’s institution with man’s institution of gay marriage. Churches compromising grace with works. Churches compromising the forgiveness of sins with a license to sin. “Who cares about a little sin, a little pornography, a little infidelity, a little false teaching, when we have so much forgiveness?” That’s a compromise of the truth.

So is this 2018 document titled *A Declaration of Inter-religious Commitment* and produced by the ELCA: “Beyond Judaism and Islam, the ELCA engages with other religious communities, including Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs, among others. The state, national, and world councils of churches have played a significant role in expanding the breadth of our inter-religious dialogue and in exploring how we understand and relate to other neighbors who self-identify as Christian, but are not trinitarian, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses. On the whole, we affirm the value of pursuing inter-religious dialogue in partnership with others whenever possible.” And I haven’t even mentioned the whole segment of Christianity called ‘The Prosperity Movement,’ which mixes greed with the Gospel and transforms Jesus Christ from Savior to Banker.

“Repent therefore!” said Jesus. **“Otherwise, I will soon come to you and fight against them with the sword of My mouth.”** Said differently: “Change. Fix this, or I will.” And the way to defeat compromise or error of any type, in any Christian congregation or in any Christian life, is by wielding that sharp, doubled-edge sword of Jesus Christ, the word of God.

Finally, as with each of His letters to the seven churches, Jesus closed His letter to Pergamum with the promise of victory, saying, **“To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it,”** Revelation 2:17. Manna refers to nourishment from heaven. A new name refers to a new identity. Whatever we give up in this life for the sake of Jesus, we know with absolute certainty that He will nourish us; that He will provide for us; that we will always belong to Him.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”