

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Seven Churches in Revelation</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>6</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Revelation 2:12-17</b>		
<b>Date:</b>	<b>September 20, 2020 (a.m.)</b>		

### PERGAMUM: THE CHURCH OF TOLERATING COMPROMISE

“There be some,” declared Spurgeon, “who cultivate faith and forget holiness; these may be very high in orthodoxy, but they shall be very deep in damnation in that day when God shall condemn those who hold the truth in unrighteousness and make the doctrine of Christ to pander to their lusts.”<sup>1</sup> The Apostle Paul spoke of the same when he wrote, “For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame” (Philippians 3:18,19). There will always be false professors in the church, tares among the wheat. In some cases they will be hard to detect -- but not always. The trouble is when the church, through ignorance of Scripture, refuses for the sake of unity or charity to take the necessary steps needed to maintain the church’s purity. The church exists in the world -- it has to -- but when the world gets into the church, like water in the boat, the church begins to sink.

- I. ***HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.*** As in the case of Smyrna, we have no further information within the confines of the New Testament on the founding of the church in Pergamum. It is probable that the efforts of the Apostle Paul were instrumental, since the city lies almost on a direct course from Ephesus to Troas, a route that Paul took on his third missionary journey (cf. Acts 20:1-5). Unlike Ephesus and Smyrna, Pergamum was not a great city of trade and commerce. It had neither a great port nor was it as centrally located on the major trade routes as Ephesus. It was, however, the seat of authority for the Roman administration. One of the major reasons was because Pergamum was the official center of the imperial religion. “The first, and for a considerable time the only, Provincial temple of the Imperial cult in Asia was built at Pergamum in honor of Rome and Augustus (29 B.C., probably). A second temple was built there in honor of Trojan, and the third in honor of Severus. Thus Pergamum was the first city to have the distinction of Temple-Warden both once and twice in the State religion; and even its third Wardenship was also a few years earlier than that of Ephesus.”<sup>2</sup> Whereas other cities in the Empire could boast of Temple, none could lay claim to the distinction given Pergamum, which had not only the oldest Temple, but also the most renowned. Pergamum was indeed “the great city of the Imperial religion.” Other deities resided in the city, the best known being Asklepios or Asclepius, the god of healing. The Greek poet Homer represents him as a physician of unsurpassing excellence. He is represented with a staff around which a serpent is twined. “Serpent-worship was the chief element in the rites and ceremonies of this deity. Asculapius was always worshiped in the form of a snake. In his temples a serpent wreathed around a staff was his invariable symbol. The emblem was in the form of a living god.”<sup>3</sup> His temple also included a college of medical priests. In addition to these, the city built a massive altar to the Greek god Zeus, which resembled a huge throne. The temple of Athena crowned the steep hill of the

Acropolis, around which the city was built. The city was also famous for its massive library. It was said to have housed over 200,000 volumes and scrolls. Thus the city was a center of culture, education and religious pride. What it lacked in commerce it made up for by its immense attraction as the provincial seat of authority, religion, and learning. It was to the ancient world what places like Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge are today.

- II. **CHRIST'S DESCRIPTION.** "These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword"<sup>4</sup>(comp. 1:16). The sword was a symbol of authority and judgment (cf. Romans 13:4). "The *sword* gives warning that the celestial king is armed to meet whatever enemy may dare to oppose his cause. It is *sharp*, so that it can easily cut through every obstacle and penetrate to the very heart. It has *two edges*, and will therefore be effectual in either direction: it can either bless or destroy. It comes *out of his mouth*: this tells of its peculiar nature – not steel or brass or material in any sense, but moral, intellectual truth uttered by him – the Word he speaks, exposing ever contrivance of lies, tearing away every covering of falsehood, and opening to the light of day all that is dark and deceitful."<sup>5</sup> It is to this church that Christ is so described, to a church that tolerates error by allowing deceitful practices on the part of some who have joined her ranks.
- III. **CHRIST'S COMMENDATION.** "I know where you live – where Satan has his throne;" later on the city is designated as the place "where Satan lives." Our Lord's commendation should be viewed against this background. The church lived in a very satanic atmosphere. A number of interpretations have been given to explain the expression *Satan's throne*: (1) a simple reference to the abundance of pagan temples; (2) the particular prominence of Asklepios, who bore the title "God our Savior" -- this is attractive because of the close association of the serpent with his worship. Christians would be sure to note the language (compare 12:9; 20:2); (3) Zeus' altar which was of great size and built like a throne; (4) the prominence of the imperial cult, this was its center -- and failure to worship the Imperial deity when called upon to do so was a capital offense. I would suggest that the interpretation is a combination of elements from all and includes the following: Satan's throne will be in the place when he can best use his influence, and so that he is not directly recognized. Thus Satan will station himself at the center of worldliness where worldly acclaim and greatness are most obvious. "The history of evil I think will prove the assertion that Satan loves to have his seat in the midst of worldly wealth, and all that stands for the feeding of the flesh life in men."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Satan will locate in the place of influence, opinion, prestige and recognition by the world. Pergamum was just the place for Satan's Throne." Christ's commendation is twofold.
- A. **Steadfastness.** "Yet you remain true to my name." The word translated "remain" is *krateis* (cf. 2:1), literally "you are holding with a tight grip." The name of Christ signifies His person, His nature, the entire compass of His being (Matthew 1:21, 10:2; John 1:12, 2:23; Acts 3:16, 4:12; Romans 10:13).
- B. **Faithfulness.** "You did not renounce your faith in me," *ērnēsō*, to say no, to deny. Aorist tense, points to a specific incident at which time "Antipas, my faithful witness was put to death."<sup>7</sup> The saints at Pergamum were loyal to the Person of Christ and committed in their faith to Him, despite the extremely adverse environment.
- IV. **CHRIST'S COMPLAINT.** "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you." Ephesus had one fault; Pergamum's are in the plural. Two areas are pointed out.

A. **Teaching of Balaam.** “You have people who hold to the teaching of Balaam.” The event referred to is found in Numbers 25 and 31:16ff. What is implied is not that there were “Balaamites” in the church in the sense that they called themselves as such, but that their creed and conduct parallels that of Balaam. The error of Balaam was intentional. It amounted to introducing pagan practices and customs in the covenant community – specifically lax attitudes towards temple feasts and sexual immorality. It seems that these people took the “strong Christian” approach – “I am free; I have liberty” – and used this as an excuse to indulge in paganism and mingle in both pagan and Christian circles.

B. **Teaching of Nicolaitans.** “Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” The expressions translated “likewise” points to a similarity between the doctrine of the latter with the former.<sup>9</sup> The teaching of both groups involved impurity or “spiritual adultery.” They were excusing their practices in the name of Christian liberty – and the church, though sound in doctrine in that it did not *teach* heresy, *tolerated* these people in the name of Christian charity. “Its fault lay in its lack of discipline in that it tolerated within its borders those holding the doctrine. The whole church did not hold the doctrine, but for some mistaken idea of expediency and polity, these people were permitting those who did hold it to remain in fellowship.”<sup>10</sup>

V. **CHRIST’S WARNING.** “Repent therefore” – cease to tolerate the people and their false doctrine! “Otherwise I will soon come,” that is, in judgment, “and will fight against them,” i.e., those who hold the false doctrine, but the church will suffer chastisement for her disobedience for failing to correct the existing situation. **NOTE THIS:** Christ, *the* Shepherd of the church, **will** accomplish His purpose in His church. If His people fail, He will not.

VI. **CHRIST’S PROMISE.** Again the exhortation (cf. 2:7, 11) is addressed to the individual, “To him that overcomes;” two things are promised:

A. **Hidden Manna.** Because of the allusion to Balaam, attention is likewise focused on Israel’s food in the wilderness, miraculously provided by God. “The manna is referred to as hidden, perhaps because it was hidden in a pot of gold and *laid up before God* (Exodus 16:23); or else because it is thought of as hidden now in the presence of God but destined to be revealed in the messianic age.”<sup>11</sup> The promise is that Christ, the living bread (John 6:31-35; 48-51) will completely satisfy, not only now in this present world, but in the one to come and in a degree not completely known to us now.

B. **White Stone.** “With a new name written on it known only to him who receives it.” This has been interpreted a number of ways: (1) as referring to the white stone of an acquitted man before a judge; (2) as a token of friendship between two friends who were parting, each would take half of the stone and it would be passed on to their sons, and if ever they met the bond would be reunited; (3) as a passport to festivals and important events; (4) or as a reference to the Urim in the mysterious “Urim and Thummim” used by the High Priest in the Old Testament, on which, it is speculated, the name of God was engraved. Commentators are equally divided on the various views. We can say, with J. R. W. Stott, that “the intimate self-revelation promised by Christ to the believers in paradise will be private and personal. Heaven will indeed be a community, but that does not mean that

we shall be like a herd of indistinguishable cattle. We shall retain our individuality and our personal relationship with Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Listen to the sobering words of Herman Hoeksema: “Thus, the church of Pergamos, by allowing these Nicolaitans to exist in the church, was in grave danger of losing its distinctive character as a church of Christ. The purpose and subtilty of the devil in this scheme is transparent. In the recent past he had made an attempt to wipe out the church and make it unfaithful to its Lord by subjecting it to bloody persecution. But in this he had failed. For the time being he now abandoned this course of action, in order to try the method of corrupting the church and thus wiping out the distinction between the church and the world. I think that in this respect the epistle of Christ to the church in Pergamos has a great lesson to teach us. Is not obliteration of all distinction and amalgamation of the church and the world characteristic of all that the devil does today? Are we not told that it matters not what form of doctrine we embrace, if only we will all be brothers? Is the devil not busily engaged in socializing and secularizing the church of Christ? And, on the other hand, is not the church of Christ growing more lax in discipline and weaker in its hold upon the truth of the Word every year? I am convinced that such are the conditions indeed. And therefore the church in Pergamos in this respect, at least, is a true picture of the church of today.”<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Delivered Sunday morning, January 24, 1864, “Faith and Life,” II Peter 1:1-4.

<sup>2</sup> W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. James Family, 1978), p. 283.

<sup>3</sup> T. Murphy, *The Message to the Seven Churches* (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1895), p. 249.

<sup>4</sup> The sword referred to is the *hromphaia*, the long and heavy broad sword, as contrasted with the *machaira* in Ephesians 6:17.

<sup>5</sup> T. Murphy, pp. 255, 256.

<sup>6</sup> R. C. Trench, *The Seven Churches* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> G. Campbell-Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians* (Revell, 1902), p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> “The Language shows that the persons meant are not teachers from abroad as at Ephesus (verse 2), but members of the congregation itself, whose presence is tolerated,” I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (rpt. Baker Book House, 1979), p. 459.

<sup>9</sup> “*Echeis* [you have] taken up the thread of verse 14 . . . while *houtōs kai su* [so you also] compares the situation at Pergamum with that of Israel exposed to the wiles of Balaam; *homoiōs* [likewise] at the end of the sentence emphasizes *houtōs* and keeps the parallel still in view.” H. B. Swete, *Commentary On Revelation* (rpt. Kregel, 1977), p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell-Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians* (Revell, 1902), pp. 101-102. W. Ramsay has written: “The Nicolaitans were to him almost worse than the open and declared enemies of Christ on the pagan side; and he would probably have entirely denied them the name Christian.” *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. James Family, 1978), p. 300.

<sup>11</sup> G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1978), p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> J. R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (IVP, 1972), p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> H. Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Kregel, 1969), p. 90.

