

“The Truth Shall Set You Free”
Revelation 2:12-17
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Text Comment

- v.12 Again, as in the other letters, the church is addressed through its “angel” and Christ is identified in reference to the vision of chapter 1. The sword is in fact coming out of his mouth as we learn in 1:16 and later in this letter in v. 16.
- v.13 Pergamum was another of the impressive cities of Asia. I have been to the Pergamum museum in what was then East Berlin and there one can see the impressive remains of what once was a great and proud city.

Pergamum is identified as the place “where Satan has his throne” in all likelihood because it was the seat of Roman government in Asia. In fact the first temple of the imperial cult in Asia was built there in 29 B.C. in honor of the emperor Augustus and the goddess Roma. The requirement of worship to the emperor was the looming danger to Christians in that time and John throughout Revelation obviously sees the Roman government as Satan’s tool. In a city like Pergamum, emperor worship was linked to patriotism and civic loyalty. [Osborne, 139] Pergamum was also the center of the worship of the serpent-god Asclepius, the god of healing, whose serpents were one of the city’s emblems. There was a famous college of medical priests in the city. The connection in the Bible between Satan and the serpent would have made the connection between Pergamum and Satan irresistible to a biblical writer. In the middle of the city was an acropolis, a thousand feet high, upon which were built many temples for the worship of various gods. So, for both political and religious reasons, it was a difficult environment for Christians.

In any case there had already been a martyrdom in Pergamum, perhaps the first as a result of the refusal of a Christian to conform to emperor worship. There were to be many more. The word for “witness” here is the Greek *martys*, from which we get “martyr.” They live in Satan’s hometown; it is not going to be easy for them.

- v.14 Clearly the advocates of the views that John is condemning did not identify themselves as followers of Balaam; that is John’s characterization of their teaching. Balaam was, both in Jewish and Christian thought, the prototype of all teachers who advocate compromise with pagan society and pagan morals. They were undoubtedly advocates of a more lax view of Christian participation in the temple and other religious ceremonies of that culture. So much of pagan life was affected by its idolatry – the food one ate, the coins one used, the holidays one celebrated, the restaurants one frequented for business meetings, and so on – that there was a great temptation for Christians to find ways to accommodate themselves to these surroundings. The reference to sexual license may refer to spiritual unchastity, that is idolatry, or may actually refer to the unchastity that was part and parcel of pagan life and worship. We know from elsewhere in the NT that it

was a new thought to many Gentile Christians that their sexual life had to be submitted to the lordship of Christ and that they were required to be chaste as single and faithful as married. In any case, their argument was probably something like: “Look, these idols aren’t real anyway; what difference does it make if we eat food offered to them or participate in the temple rituals. In fact, most of the pagans do these things not out of religious belief but civic duty. We’re good citizens too. [Osborne, 144] In that way we can remain friends with our fellow citizens and perhaps in that way be a witness to them.” Lurking beneath, however, were the attractions of sensuality and worldliness as well as that of the safety that came through such accommodation to the lifestyle of the culture.

- v.15 The language used suggests that the people described in v. 14 *are* the Nicolaitans, not some different group. Read the opening word as “so” rather than “likewise.” The Nicolaitan viewpoint was characterized by a laxity toward pagan practices.
- v.16 Again, as in the first letter, there is a threat that if this sin is not repented of the Lord will judge the church. The sin of the church was its indifference to the presence of this laxity toward Christian faithfulness among some if not many of her members. The Lord would come to the entire church but his wrath would be particularly directed at the heretics.

You will notice that “the sword of my mouth” ties the end of the letter together with the description of Christ in v. 12 at the beginning of the letter. The believers are being reminded where the real judgment and the real power is to be found.

- v.17 Again the letter concludes as do the others with a promise of eternal life to those who remain faithful. In this case the promise takes the form of their eating the food of the messianic feast at the end of the age. If they were faithful in rejecting the tainted food of pagan Pergamum, the Lord would give them heavenly food in due time. Small stones were used like tokens or tickets in the ancient world for admission to public festivals. This stone will get a person into the feast the Lord is preparing for his people. The “new name” seems to refer to the name of the faithful believer, an idea drawn from Isaiah 62:2: “...you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.” It is an image for a new age, a new situation, a new life, all of which awaits those who are faithful to the Lord. All through Revelation both “white” and “new” are adjectives of heavenly things.

There is something eerily contemporary about this letter written nearly 2000 years ago: a city proud of its sophistication, but sensual and worldly in its outlook; a Christian church being tempted to accommodate its ethics to those of the surrounding culture; and a growing rift between church and society. What is there about the church in Pergamum that we cannot immediately identify with?

Abraham Kuyper once wrote:

“Heresies arise on Christian territory by a fixed law [like a mirage in the atmosphere]. They are a ‘necessary deflection of the light of Christianity in the spiritual atmosphere of a given age.’” [Cited in Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, 9-10]

Kuyper means that heresies, malformations of the Christian faith and life, take their particular shape and derive their power from the culture. That is, the Christian church in any particular time or place will be tempted to deny the faith or shave it in ways that will commend it to its society and culture; in ways that seem sensible even laudable to people whose thinking has been shaped by that particular culture. The attraction of the falsehood is found precisely in the fact that it bridges the distance that otherwise must open up between Christians and non-Christians. Think of our own situation as Christians in this culture. There is no great danger of the Christian church succumbing to the attractions of Islam or Buddhism. Islam *never* made inroads into Christendom except by the sword. But it is very easy to imagine the church being menaced by corrupt forms of Christianity itself and those forms are very likely to be very like Nicolaitanism, which is to say forms of Christianity that have been accommodated to the mores of our society. We have our teachers today who are urging us to be less confrontational with the society round about, to be more *dialogical*. That is the new buzz word. Don’t make such an issue, they say, of our differences. Try to meet them half-way. And Christians are doing that in great numbers. But the society is not coming to meet us; we are moving toward the culture.

We live in an unprecedentedly sensual culture, very like the culture of Balaam and of Pergamum. And Christians are deciding in great numbers that the strict sexual ethics of the Bible are too severe. It will cause psychological damage to heterosexuals and homosexuals alike to be required to live lives of abstinence unless they are united in marriage to a person of the opposite sex. This is the way our culture thinks and so it is the way that many Christians are tempted to think; and many now do. And if some are not openly advocating a promiscuous lifestyle, they are practicing it with less and less of a troubled conscience. Promiscuity is simply more and more natural in a time and place such as ours and to stand against it requires great determination of will. It is absolutely predictable that some evangelicals are now saying that we are making too much of sexual issues such as homosexuality or gay marriage and that some of our men have now accepted that homosexual relationships are acceptable (e.g. Lewis Smedes).

Or think of our therapeutic society which has taught all its citizens to care first and foremost about their own personal fulfillment. Christians are seeking divorce for personal fulfillment in enormous numbers in our day. It seems to them, breathing modern air as they do every day, that it would be impossible for God to want them to remain in a marriage that didn’t meet their expectations, that had disappointed them, that didn’t make them happy. Even the wellbeing of children shouldn’t be allowed to stand in the way of an adult seeking happiness for himself or herself. Strange as it may seem to some of us that a real Christian could think or say such a thing, in fact multitudes of them are thinking it and saying it. It is the way most everyone thinks in this society and so it is natural for Christian thoughts to drift in that same direction. Heresy, Kuyper said, is to be found in the direction of the culture, not away from it.

So the church is not being tempted by patriarchalism in our day but by feminism. An entirely new view and anti-biblical view of children and their place in life is now found in many parts of the church. Children are to be fit into their parents’ plans and hopes for a career and a particular

kind of lifestyle. No longer are children the reason for a parent's being and the object for which and on behalf of which all a parent's decisions and priorities must be made and shaped. More and more children exist for the parents rather than parents for the children.

Or consider the ascendant relativism and pluralism of our culture, the insistence on every side of toleration for all manner of outlooks and viewpoints. Again, the church is not being tempted to hold extra-exclusivist positions, as it has sometimes done, whereby one must be a follower of a particular sect of Christians in order to be saved. The temptation is rather that Christians should begin to imagine that people can be saved who are not Christians at all and who do not have a living faith in Jesus Christ. A generation ago you had to be a Roman Catholic to be saved; now in many if not most Roman Catholic circles, you don't even have to be a Christian, and this idea is springing up everywhere nowadays in evangelical Christian circles.

So it was in Pergamum. The whole city and its culture were shaped by its temples and its idolatry and its sensual worship with temple prostitutes and all the rest. The cult of the Roman emperor was everywhere. It had become a badge of citizenship to partake in that silly worship. A great many people no doubt thought it was silly – worshipping a man as a god and a man whose entirely human limitations were perfectly well known – but they did it anyway. The Gentile Christians in the Pergamum Church had been a part of that culture from their youth. It was simply a way of life for them. They could easily say that they never took it seriously before they became Christians and they certainly didn't take it seriously afterward. So why make an issue of it. Perhaps they said then what many evangelicals are saying now: that the best way to win the people of Pergamum was not to separate from them but to participate with them in their lives, show them that Christians are people too. We shouldn't judge them. God will do that. We need to befriend them and then we can witness to them. And what better place to befriend them than to share a meal at a temple or participate with them in one or another of the ceremonies of Pergamum life.

To the Nicolaitans it seemed silly to provoke the government and the city population by Christian intransigence. And, of course, there is no need for Christians to provoke unnecessarily. Heresies are often right on the main essentials of Christian faith and life and wrong on just one or a few points. That is why they have such power to beguile Christians. The Nicolaitans weren't denying the deity of Christ or his cross or his resurrection from the dead. The Nicolaitans weren't even denying that Christians needed to live holy lives. They were simply saying that that holiness didn't require the sort of separation from society and its practices that so offended the locals, angered the government, and made it so hard on the Christians themselves. It didn't have to be so grindingly difficult to be a Christian. Come on, brethren, stop and smell the roses! And *that* is precisely what a chorus of voices is saying to evangelical Christians today and the message sounds plausible and the approach eminently reasonable precisely because it meshes so neatly with the world in which we live every day.

So what's the problem? *The problem is the truth!* That unyielding, fixed, and absolute standard that refuses to be trimmed or shaved in any way. The one who has a sharp, two-edged sword coming out of his mouth has spoken and has said that faithfulness to him and a life of Christian integrity cannot be reconciled to pagan practices, cannot be harmonized with pagan worship, cannot be made friendly with a way of life that is offensive to God. The problem is that God

forbids sex outside of marriage; he forbids divorce except when certain objective and clearly defined and egregious sins have been committed against the marriage. The problem is that God considers Christian children both the future of his kingdom and the sacred stewardship of those to whom he entrusts them. The problem is there is but one way to God and heaven and that is the way of faith in Jesus Christ.

Years ago C.S. Lewis famously said:

“If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be: if it is true, every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives him no help at all.” [*God in the Dock*, 108-109]

That statement sounds quaint in our day and age. Many nowadays would mock Lewis’ statement: as if there were such a thing as truth! As if one person has the truth and another person is simply wrong! What a judgmental and arrogant thing to think! Nowadays, people are more likely to say that truth is *whatever one finds helpful even if it is the contradiction of what someone else finds helpful. It is truth in either case. Truth is something that lies more on the subjective side of life rather than the objective; it belongs more to feelings and longings and aspirations than to facts.* When the definitions of important words in the vocabulary of a people are being changed – words such as truth and marriage – you know that powerful forces are at work. Satan is so powerful he can even rewrite the dictionary. Truth has now come more and more to mean something other than “the state of being the case.”

But, of course, this redefinition of truth is nonsense and needs to be called what it is. Lewis’ logic is in fact irresistible. No one actually believes this rot about truth being relative anyway and Christians should be the first to point this out. Even those who say they believe it prove they do not by so obviously and constantly giving away the fact that they think their opinions are true and those of others are not. Richard Rorty, the American philosopher, will say that there is no sure basis on which to say that the German execution of millions of Jews was wrong; but he doesn’t hesitate to say that evangelical Christians are as bad as the Nazis because they deny to homosexuals the fulfillment of their natural desires.

The fact is there is an entire world of reality in which no one has any doubt of the existence of truth and error. They certainly don’t want air traffic control to indulge the illusion that all routes lead to the airport. They don’t want their children to think that whatever number they wish to be written at the bottom of their bank balance is truth for them. They don’t want their police department to think that whatever speed the officer imagines they were traveling is truth for the purposes of a citation. They don’t want their doctor to take the view that whatever he would like the outcome of the test to be is truth for the patient. The Boeing machinists don’t think that truth is whatever management wishes it to be and they certainly don’t think that their truth is no better or worse than management’s truth. *Everyone believes in the existence of facts*; hard, intractable facts that remain what they are no matter what people think or want. They may think that what is false is true or vice versa, but they believe very definitely there is such a thing as truth in the old fashioned sense; truth in the sense of what, in fact, is the case. Every sentence that Senators Obama and McCain utter during this campaign furnishes the proof that they believe in absolutes; in facts; in there being something that is in fact the case.

What people really mean when they speak of something being true for you but not for others, or when they speak of truth as simply opinion or, worse, as nothing but a power-play, a claim to the existence of facts that is really nothing other than a means to exploit others for one's own sake, they are referring to larger claims about God, about man, about right and wrong, about meaning. These things, they claim, are of a completely different order than the reading of a radar gun or a bank balance or a test for cancer. But that is poppycock. Who says that there is no truth in regard to such important and fundamental things? People are as utterly inconsistent and hypocritical here as everywhere else. Are there, for example, really no moral absolutes? Is it actually the case that any statement that begins "you ought to..." is precisely the same sort of statement as "I itch" or "I have a headache," that is, nothing more than an account of a person's feelings? Show me anyone who actually lives according to that viewpoint. No one ever has; no one ever will. There are facts, there are absolute standards and everyone knows it.

The question is not whether there is truth; the question is: what is the truth? And the answer is: what God has revealed to be true, whether by his natural revelation that is, what can be learned from nature, or by his special revelation, that is, Holy Scripture. And what he reveals, as here to the church in Pergamum, is that there are standards by which we are to live, *his standards*, and that failing to live by those standards will bring his judgment. There is a correct way to understand the faith and an incorrect. There is such a thing as orthodoxy and such a thing as heresy. There is such a thing as obedience and such a thing as disobedience. God alone will judge between them, but he has revealed his will so that we may know what is true and what is not; what is right and what is wrong; what thinking and living belong to heaven and what thinking and living belong to hell.

But precisely because truth is truth, a fact, an inflexible, unchangeable, unyielding reality, it can make life difficult for those who embrace it who live among many who do not. This is the naked challenge of living for the truth and according to the truth in a place where Satan, the father of lies, has made his home.

A few days ago I received an email from a friend who works at Covenant College describing a conversation he had had with a former classmate and Covenant alumna who had just visited the campus. He told me about the conversation he had with her and about her appreciation for what she had learned at Covenant and the difference it had made in her life. It had prepared her well for medical school and for her life and work as a doctor. But, she said, "Covenant also taught me how to get fired." My friend was startled by that statement and so she explained that she had worked in a hospital that pushed her to give out the RU486 pill in the emergency room. She said she looked her supervisor in the eye and said "I believe that God has ordained every life on earth and that life begins at the moment of conception. I will not hand out that pill." She was fired right then and right there but left the hospital knowing that she had done the right thing and knowing that God would take care of her. And she credited Covenant for giving her that confidence. She is now in another practice in another hospital and loves her work and takes medical missions trips every year overseas and is very active in her church.

Truth means that Christians sometimes are fired from their jobs. Truth means that there are jobs that are off-limits for Christians and that in some circumstances it may be more difficult for them

to get work. Truth means that, despite their best efforts, others may think them arrogant, pretentious, and judgmental. Truth means that Christians are sometimes executed for their faith as Antipas was in Pergamum. But truth also means that those who are faithful, like Antipas, will be noted for their faithfulness by the one who has a sharp, double-edged sword coming out of his mouth and rewarded for it in eternal years to come. Truth means that there is but a single alternative: you can make your life a great deal easier in this world, or you can have a white stone and a new name. Truth means there is that alternative and no other.

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne, –
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.

(James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis*, 1944)