

## THE CHURCH THAT COMPROMISED

### ***The Message to Pergamum***

#### **Revelation 2:12-17**

<sup>12</sup> “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword: <sup>13</sup> “I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. <sup>14</sup> But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. <sup>15</sup> So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup> Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

#### **Brief historical context:**

Pergamum was the capital city of the Pergamum Empire before the time of Jesus. In 200 BC king Attalus of Pergamum made a treaty with Rome which gave him control over almost all of Asia Minor. However, his grandson Attalus the 3<sup>rd</sup> bequeathed the city back to the Roman Empire upon his death. This strategically opened up Turkey to all the sea ports of commerce to the Roman Empire (Black Sea, Aegean Sea and Mediterranean Sea).

It was a great risk to be a Christian in first century Pergamum known at that time for its idol worship (gods and goddesses). The city was the first centre of emperor-worship in Asia Minor. Just to mention a few of the array of gods and goddesses:

- Zeus – king of the gods
- Dionysus – god of wine and rivalry
- Demeter – goddess of food and good crops
- Asklepiion – god of healing (snakes did the healing)
- Athena – goddess of wisdom
- Trajan – the imperial cult worship (Caesar as lord)

Such was the scene of Pergamum, and if you were a follower of Jesus Christ and refused to bow this was very risky indeed.

#### **Jesus’ Identity:**

He who has the sharp two-edged sword:

#### **Message:**

“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is...yet you are holding fast the faith despite great persecution...still I have a few things against you...

*The challenge of the claims of Jesus over these gods and goddesses, was such that every aspect of the church’s life was impacted and touched by Pergamum idolatrous culture. Their very lives were at risk because of their stance for Jesus Christ.*

Tradition holds that Antipas Bishop of Pergamum, commissioned by the Apostle John and Bishop of Ephesus, was martyred in AD 92. Antipas was burned to death in a brazen bull-shaped altar that was used for casting out demons. In fact, the Roman governor for the region had his head office in Pergamum — and, it is said he had the right to the sword.

**Balaam** — was the prophet hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel, but whose utterances God caused to come out as blessings (Num 22:4). Balaam is blamed for the sexual sin of the Israelites with Moabite women (Num 31:16). In Num 25:1-2, Israel's sexual sin with Moabite women was in association with idolatry as they participated in heathen worship. In 2 Peter 2:15 and Jude 11, Balaam is described as the forerunner of all corrupt teachers.

The **sword of Rome** was a symbol of authority and power and, death by sword came in a variety of ways. It is said that as the governor walked the streets someone will walk in front of him holding up a giant sword – creating fear and intimidation.

Jesus acknowledges that Christians have held fast in the face of Antipas' death — some however chose to compromise their faith while still remaining in the church. Jesus says to them they cannot do that. They cannot assimilate into the sexually immoral and idolatrous culture of Pergamum and at the same time be a part of the church. They cannot synchronise the worship to idols with worship to Jesus. Faithfulness to God but compromise with idolatry is no faithfulness at all — you cannot live in both worlds at the same time. The problem wasn't the Church in Pergamum — it was too much of Pergamum was in the church.

#### Reward:

To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna (recalls Exodus 16), and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Jesus said to them if they stay faithful and true he will give them '**manna from heaven**' alluding to the feeding with manna in the wilderness and to God's eternal provision. They will also be given a **White stone** with their names engraved. It is said that invitations to major festivities and events by the Emperor were done on a white piece of marble with the name engraved as an invitation to attend, and when you entered the festivities, you will present the invitation on this white piece of marble that had your name on it.

Christians were debarred from festivals and had no welcome into society or the culture — but Jesus will invite them to his feast — their names will be on their white stone, a name no one else knows (like your personal pin number), suggesting a personal intimate relationship with Jesus — they will be welcomed into the feast and pleasures of Jesus' eternal presence — this certainly is worth staying true and faithful for. Those who are faithful, great will be their reward in heaven.

#### Relevance:

The message to the Church in Pergamum is a challenging one. Sin and the call to repentance are being proclaimed less and less in today's church. Sometimes, we preachers think that it is our job to make people feel good about themselves, and often, sermons on hell doesn't go down well either in today's church. Maybe the church today doesn't take Jesus' warning of judgement as seriously as it needs to be taken:

many Christians nowadays feel very uncomfortable with saying 'Jesus is the only way' — often we qualify this statement by adding **for me** but **not for everybody else**.

Suffering is another difficult issue for modern Christians — often modern Christians don't understand what Jesus means when he says to 'take up your cross and follow me' — suffering is part and parcel of following Jesus and allowing the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Since Jesus was upset with all this stuff at Pergamum, I wonder what he thinks of it today?

By compromising with the culture and trying to live around the edges of their faith in Jesus Christ, caused the Church in Pergamum to lose its edge, its distinctiveness and its dynamic difference in the power of the gospel.

Idols are not just innocent carvings of wood, stone and iron etc.; they are manmade replicas of spiritual demonic entities (realities). Jesus says you can't indulge in sexual immorality and idol worship (feast) and at the same time be faithful and true to him — Jesus called the Church in Pergamum to repent.

The 'sharp two-edged sword' symbolises the penetrating power of the divine word — therefore, it comes out of Jesus' mouth — this recalls Hebrews 4:12 and Isaiah 49:2.

#### **Counter cultural reflective points:**

- Do you think Christians should assimilate into the culture of the day?
- What is distinctive about the Christian gospel?
- 'Jesus is the only way' — is this true for all people today?
- "Body Theology" — does Jesus have anything to say to his Church today regarding serving him with the physical "body"?