

11 March 2007

“Pergamum: The Loyal Church in the Danger Zone”

Revelation 2:12-17

This is a great place to live. According to the TV commercial, British Columbia is “the best place on earth.” I don’t know about you, but I, for one, am glad to be living in the GVRD (Greater Vancouver Regional District).

There is unsurpassed natural beauty, there is variety; there is tolerance and, on the whole, there is civility. There is wealth and there is hedonism, but there is also philanthropy and a concern for the environment. The climate is moderate. The lifestyle is convenient. And we live in a particularly pleasant corner of the Lower Mainland.

Yes, there is a seamy side to it all as well. There is the homelessness of the Downtown East Side and there are the grow ops. And there are the hooligans who abuse the privilege of peaceful protest by resorting to vandalism and violence. But, taken as a whole, we live in a pretty decent place.

I need, however, to ask a question. If we attempt to look beneath the surface; if we look beyond the beautiful parks, beyond the buzz of Granville Island, the stately homes of Shaughnessy, the picturesque setting of Horseshoe Bay and the quaint atmosphere of Fort Langley . . . If we attempt to evaluate the spiritual condition of our metropolitan region, would we have to conclude that it is a stronghold of Satan? More importantly, if our all-knowing Saviour were to comment on the region, would he say something very similar to what he said about Pergamum: “I know where you live – where Satan has his throne”?

That is how the Lord described Pergamum, the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. Just *why* did he characterize this particular city in this way? There is, of course, a sense in which all Christians who live in the world live where Satan’s has his throne (and that, of course, includes all of us). There are a few interesting theories as to why of the seven cities mentioned here, this particular city is described in these terms. I’ll get to that in a minute or two. But let me say right away that I believe the message to the church at Pergamum is particularly relevant to us today. As Canadian Christians living on the west coast, we find ourselves in a congenial atmosphere. But it is not one that is particularly favourable to the gospel. Our wonderful city is for the most part a godless city. We need to hear this timely word.

Last week I mentioned that the churches depicted in these seven letters were involved in a life-and-death spiritual battle. We noted that there are three aspects or dimensions to this battle. There was a *physical* dimension: they were under pressure to *capitulate*. There was a *mental* dimension: they were under pressure to *conform*. And there was a *moral* dimension: they were under pressure to *compromise*.

As we looked at the church at Smyrna, we saw that the accent was on the physical battle – and the church was winning that battle because its members were prepared to suffer and even die for the faith. This week the accent shifts to the mental and moral aspects of the battle. John Stott comments that at Pergamum “a pitched battle was being fought, in which the combatants were not people but ideas.”¹ The church at Pergamum was in far greater danger than the church at Smyrna. And the church here is in far greater danger than the church in an openly hostile environment – an avowedly atheistic state or a militantly Islamic country. So, let’s hear what the Lord has to say to this church, to our church living in this contented but secular society and to each one of us who shares our neighbourhood with the prince of darkness.

I WE KNOW FROM THE WAY THE LORD INTRODUCES HIMSELF THAT HE FEELS VERY STRONGLY ABOUT THE SITUATION

“These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.”

- A. In his vision of the risen Lord, John had seen this sharp double-edged sword proceeding from Jesus’ mouth. Before we go any further, we get the sense from the Lord’s self description that he is going to cut to the core.
- B. This is confirmed when he says: “Repent therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” He adopts a ‘no-nonsense’ approach here and we shall see why as we proceed through the message.

II HE KNOWS THAT THEY LIVE IN A PLACE WHERE IT IS DIFFICULT TO BE A CHRISTIAN AND HE TELLS THEM TO STAY RIGHT WHERE THEY ARE

¹³*I know where you live – where Satan has his throne.*

- A. I said I would try to tell you why Pergamum is described as the place where Satan had his throne. Commentators have made several interesting suggestions. I think there are three possibilities.
 - 1. Behind the city, on a huge cone-shaped hill, was a temple to Zeus, the greatest of the Greek gods. The altar to Zeus was built on a ledge, jutting out from the hillside about two hundred metres above the city. This resembled a huge throne which towered over all the people of Pergamum.² Nice theory, but I don’t think that’s the reason.

¹ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 50.

² Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 78.

2. On the same cone-shaped hill was another temple – the temple to the god of healing, Asklepios. The symbol of Asklepios was a serpent. In fact, William Barclay tells us that people used to come to the temple for healing. “Sufferers were allowed to spend the night in the darkness of the temple (where there were) tame snakes.” (Pardon my ignorance of reptiles, but I think “tame snakes” is an oxymoron). The idea was that while you were lying there on the floor one of these snakes would glide over your body. “The touch of the snake was held to be the touch of the god himself, and the touch was held to bring health and healing.”³ Next time you complain about the health crisis in BC or about Fraser Health, just think of the alternative!

Of course, Christians would be aware of the fact that the serpent was nothing less than the emblem of Satan himself, so the prominence of the emblem of Asklepios could have contributed to this designation. But I don't think this is the reason that the Lord said Satan had his throne in Pergamum.

3. The least spectacular but most plausible explanation is simply this: Pergamum was the capital city of Asia. It had the right to execute and it was the centre of Emperor-worship. Here Caesar worship was at its most intense.⁴ John Stott concludes: “So Pergamum was a dark place. The light of truth filtered only weakly into it. It was steeped in the dense fogs of error. For Satan's realm is where ‘darkness reigns,’ he is the ruler of ‘this dark world’ and hates the light (Luke 22:53; Eph 6:12; John 3:20).⁵ At the end of the day, it's not so important that we know exactly why the Lord described the city in this way. What is important is that we recognize that Satan is active throughout the world and that his activity seems to be concentrated in certain places. Maybe our metropolis is one of those places.
- B. If Satan was particularly active in Pergamum, would it not be wise for Christians to move from such a dark and oppressive city? And, if we conclude that the spiritual climate in the GVRD is not really conducive to living the Christian life, should we not pick up our belongings and move to a place that is more friendly to the gospel?

No! Listen to Jesus' high-priestly prayer: “I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:14-15).

³ William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 49-50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵ Stott, *What Christ Thinks*, 59.

We can sometimes make Greek words say more than they were intended to say, but often the language helps us to bring a truth into sharp focus. And this little word translated “live” is an interesting one. When the New Testament speaks of the church dwelling in the world it ordinarily uses the word that emphasises that we are pilgrims and strangers (*paroikein*; Heb 11:9; 1 Pet 1:1).⁶ But here the word that is used conveys the idea of residence in a settled and permanent place (*katoikein*). The implication, in other words, is this: True, Satan’s activity is rampant in the city, but you have got to go on living there. In Pergamum you are, and in Pergamum you must stay! It is there that you must show that you are a Christian!

I may be speaking to someone who is living in a dark place. And it’s difficult! Whether this refers to your home or your workplace, you wonder whether you should not seek a more spiritually favourable environment. Every situation is unique and there are times when God, who knows everything, may move us from a particular situation. But usually the hostility of an environment is a reason to stay, not to go. You need grace, but there is more than enough of that.

III THEY HAD FACED A VIOLENT ASSAULT FROM THE OUTSIDE AND HAD REMAINED FAITHFUL

Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.

The tenses of the verbs used here tell us two important things.

- A. In the first place they *had been* placed under pressure to renounce the name of Jesus and they had not renounced their faith. The (aorist) tense here conveys a completed action in the past. They had come under a concerted attack and they had not buckled. That intense attack had passed. At least one man had died as a martyr. (Antipas is described as “my faithful witness” – the same designation that is applied to Jesus in 1:5).
- B. But not only had they faced a particularly fierce attack in the past: they remain (present continuous tense) true to the name of Jesus in the present. So they receive the Lord’s commendation both in respect of their past record and also in respect of their present stand.

IV BUT THEY WERE FACING A SUBTLE BUT FAR MORE DEADLY ASSAULT FROM THE INSIDE – AND SO ARE WE

¹⁴Nevertheless, 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

⁶ Barclay, *Letters*, 54-5.

eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵*Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*

(We are about to see just how up-to-date this message is).

- A. Usually I move from the text to our situation. Let me do things the other way round.
- B. We are fighting a spiritual battle on both the mental and the moral front. We are under pressure. We are under pressure to conform to the thought patterns of this world – the world where Satan has his throne, no less. And we are under pressure to drop our moral guard.

So many distinctions have become blurred. No, no, I am not advocating that we return to the irrational legalism of yesteryear. Some of us grew up with some rigid rules and regulations (everything from make-up and dress codes to arbitrary prohibitions). I never could work out why foundation cream and blusher were okay but lipstick was not, why ear rings were banned and broaches were not).

We became “enlightened” and ditched the legalism of the past. But, in the process, we blurred some necessary distinctions. And, without realizing it, we have plunged ourselves into peril. Slowly but surely we imbibe the mindset of the sick society in which we live. In the name of enlightenment and liberty, we take in trash.

- C. What exactly was going on in the church at Pergamum? It’s actually not so hard to work out. Let me attempt to put it in a nutshell. Some, who were still part of the church, were teaching that if Christians were sensible they would realize that it was quite okay for them to eat food sacrificed to idols. They knew, after all, that idols are only stone or wood or metal. (Cf. 1 Cor 8:1-13; 10:14-32) So, if they received an invitation to dine in a room at one of the temples, why make themselves into pariahs? “Adopt an enlightened approach. If you do, you can “have your cake and eat it.” You can remain true to the Lord in your conscience and you can remain in good standing with your heathen relatives and the authorities.⁷

That’s the meaning of the reference to Balaam. He was hired to curse Israel, but was prevented from doing so by the LORD (Num 24:1-25:3). He did the next best (actually ‘next worst’) thing. He “*taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality*” (Num 31:16).

⁷ In this particular context, there was apparently more than simply the purchase of food in the marketplace that may have been offered to an idol. Some form of participation seems to have been in view.

There's been a fair amount of debate about exactly who the Nicolaitans were. They were not identical with but were very similar to those who held the teaching of Balaam.⁸ Based on an observation by the church father, Irenaeus, I think that the most likely explanation is this. They argued that the spirit is saved when we come to Christ and that the body is just an outer shell. We know for a fact that this kind of teaching was becoming rife in the churches of Asia Minor. You just have to read John's first letter to see that there were some who were saying they had no sin. These were not "holier-than-thou" types. Rather they were people who latched on to the idea that the spirit is not affected by the acts of the body and argued, on that basis, that they were without sin. Therefore, sexual misconduct would not seriously affect your salvation. Immorality was the order of the day in that society, as it is today. So here was a way to justify compromise and believe that it would not have a detrimental spiritual effect. That's why John says: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

How very up to date this all is. Anything that induces us to imagine that, on account of our spiritual standing, we are able to participate in sinful activities without doing serious damage to ourselves and the cause of Christ is a deadly distortion of the gospel. That's precisely what John says:

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he (Jesus) is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor anyone who does not love his brother (1 John 3:7-10).

Do you see where the real problem lay? *It was not that they were living where Satan had his throne – in the world. It was that some within the church were suggesting that they adopt the ways of the world.* And, worst of all, they were attempting to provide a theological legitimation for their compromise.

V THE LORD DID NOT MINCE MATTERS THEN AND NEITHER DOES HE DO SO NOW

¹⁶Repent therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

⁸ The wording of the passage links the two influences but also makes a distinction between them.

- A. From his point of view as Lord of the church, the situation is intolerable. He threatens the most drastic action. He calls on the church to repent. In other words, he says that the whole church bears some responsibility for this state of affairs. If they do not repent he says that he, himself, will fight against those who are misleading the church with the sword that cuts to shreds.
- B. But why is he so indignant? It is because he knows what it will do. His church that won the physical battle is about to lose the mental and moral battles. Its very life is at stake. Nowadays people tend to play love off against truth. But you can't do that. Because the Lord loves us, he is opposed to falsehood. He knows that truth liberates and gives life; he knows that falsehood enslaves and brings death (John 8:32-36).

VI THE SHORT-TERM COST OF OBEDIENCE IS MORE THAN OFFSET BY ITS LONG-TERM REWARD

To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

- A. Needless to say, there has been much discussion on the precise meaning of the Lord's promise to the overcomer here.
- B. Many Jews believed that Jeremiah had hidden the *pot of manna* that was in the Holy of Holies and that when the Messiah came, it would reappear. Whether or not the Lord is alluding to that idea, the central thought is clear. Those who forego eating meat offered to idols on account of their loyalty to him will receive the vastly superior food reserved for them.
- C. We cannot be dogmatic about *the white stone* with the new name written on it known only to him who receives it. There are at least nine suggestions, none of which is entirely satisfactory. This is one of those cases where the allusion in the promise would have been clearer to the original readers than it is to us. Two suggestions deserve our attention.

William Barclay explains that in ancient times amulets were commonly worn and that often these were made of white or precious stones.

The amulet was supposed to keep the person safe; and on the amulet was mystic writing, and the amulet was held to be doubly effective if none but the wearer knew what was written on it. So the risen Christ is saying: "You wear amulets to keep you safe; you use your superstitious charms to protect you; you who are Christians have no need of that; for the man who has my name written on his heart is safe in life and death." Even amidst the

perils of Pergamum no one could pluck a Christian from the hand of Christ.⁹

I think Darrell Johnson makes the best suggestion. “When two friends were about to part, they would divide a white stone in half. Each friend would inscribe his or her name on one of the halves and give it to the other.”¹⁰ It became a symbol and a promise of their friendship as long as the stone lasted. In other words, his name is written on my half and mine on his. Here, I may have to forego the acceptance of the crowd and even a cherished friendship. But the Lord himself pledges his intimate eternal friendship, and he gives me a new name – a new identity that is personal to me.

Conclusion

Perhaps as we have considered the Lord’s words to the church at Pergamum, he has alerted you to the subtle erosion that has been taking place in your life. Whatever its precise form, there has been compromise. Unnoticeably! What you thought was harmless has drawn you away. Your Lord speaks so strongly because he loves you so deeply. It is time to recommit!

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⁹ Barclay, *Letters*, 63

¹⁰ Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge*, 86