

What Christ Expects of His Church

4. The Letter to Pergamum: Truth

Revelation 2:12-17

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina
July 5, 2020

In our continuing quest to discern what Jesus Christ expects of the community called by his name we continue to look for clues and insights that we might derive from those cryptic, apocalyptic letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor found in the opening chapters of Revelation.

In the first letter to the church of Ephesus we learned that love, love for God and God's people, love even for one another within the church is preeminent. We can believe all the right things and do all the right things. We can be paragons of orthodoxy and virtue, but apart from love, our faith and works are inadequate. The church, therefore, must be prepared to love above all else. And the fact was that in the church of Ephesus that expected love which they had at first was beginning to wane.

In the second letter to Smyrna we saw that the church must also be prepared to suffer if need be and we learned that often the cost of following Jesus can be very high. Discipleship demands sacrifice from every follower. Suffering for one's faith is not necessary, but it is likely inevitable because the church has always existed as an alien community in a foreign land. Whatever the culture, be it in the first century Rome or the twenty-first century America, the church is a counter-cultural movement. And whenever the church becomes the tool of the state or an uncritical defendant of the state then it is flirting with idolatry. In their Barmen Declaration the German evangelical church consisting of Lutheran, Reformed and United churches declared in the face of Hitler's Germany that Jesus alone was Lord. They declared: "Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." If you believe that too then in some way at some time your faith will cost, you something. But then again, a faith that cost you nothing is probably worth little to you.

Today we consider the letter to Pergamum, the third church on the seven city circuit and I would suggest that in light of this letter the church of Jesus Christ is not only characterized by fervent love and courageous suffering, but also by a commitment to seeking and embracing the truth that comes from God.

This is one of the longer and most mysterious of the seven letters. Once again, we hear Jesus saying the he “knows” the situation faced by this church just as was the case in Ephesus (2:2) and Smyrna (2:9). His message to this church is not based on hearsay or speculation. No, we have already learned that Jesus is “in the midst of the lampstands” (1:13) which are the churches and that he “walks among” them (2:2). Jesus knew the situation facing the churches just as he knows the situation facing the church today.

And what is it that Jesus knows about the church of Pergamum? He knows that their very location is a danger and a threat for Pergamum was “where Satan has his throne”. And what does this mean? Pergamum was not the metropolis Ephesus was, nor was it the beautiful “glory of Asia” as Smyrna was known. But because Pergamum was the ancient capital of the province of Asia and before that the capital of the old Seleucide kingdom that existed in that part of the world after the Greek empire of Alexander the Great was divided among his four generals. Pergamum’s claim to fame was that it was the seat of government and this was also the source of its shame as well. It was the political and religious center of emperor worship throughout the region.

When Greece ruled that part of the world Pergamum regarded itself as a guardian and defender of the Greek way of life and the promoter of the worship of the Greek gods. It had a great altar dedicated to Zeus, the chief of the gods. And this altar stood before an elegant temple to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. But the god most closely identified with Pergamum was Asclepius, the god of healing. The temple to Asclepius was where people flocked for healing making it the “Lourdes of the ancient world”, as some have called it. A common title for Asclepius, whose symbol was the serpent which still appears on medical symbols today, was *Asclepius Soter* meaning Asclepius the savior. And we can only imagine how this title must have offended Christians who saw in Jesus the real and only savior.

Many of the shrines and temples in Pergamum were built on the tall, cone-shaped hill that dominated the valley of the River Caicus. This prominent point could be seen from 15 miles out in the Aegean Sea and this hill with its temples resembled a king’s throne. Perhaps this is why John refers to Pergamum as the throne of Satan. (Go online when you have a moment and *Google* Pergamon Museum in Berlin and you can see for yourself the wonder and magnificence and beauty of at least one of the temple that was moved to Germany as a gift for the Germans who built the rail roads of Turkey before World War I.)

But of course these Greek and Roman gods were never really much of a threat to the people of God who dismissed them as only trivial and manmade nuisances. But there was in Pergamum a much greater threat from a so-called god because worship of the emperor, Caesar, was taken with extreme and deadly seriousness. In 29 AD Pergamum received

permission to build and dedicate a temple to a living emperor, and that was Caesar Augustus, the same emperor mentioned in Luke's Christmas story.

And why was the emperor worship such a threat to the church? The imperial cult required each and every citizen to appear before the proconsul of the province, who no doubt resided in the capital city of Pergamum. And there before a bust of the emperor which was set on a pedestal a sacred fire was lit. All that was required was for the faithful adherent to sprinkle a small amount of incense on the fire and proclaim "Caesar is Lord". But such a profession was blasphemy for either a devout Jew or a devout Christian. Many Jews acquiesced according to histories written at the time and went along with this charade, but Christians steadfastly refused and thus brought on the ire of the state.

But what option did the church have? Did the church not remember the words of Jesus to "render under Caesar that which was Caesar's and unto God the things which were God's"? Lordship was God's prerogative, not Caesar's! Had the Christians not been baptized professing "Jesus is Lord", and had they not already affirmed what Paul would write later to the Philippians that God had exalted Jesus and given to Jesus alone the name that was above every name so that at the name of Jesus, not Caesar, every knee in heaven and earth should bow and every tongue confess what?...That Jesus Christ is Lord! Therefore, nothing could be more Satanic than denying the Lordship of Christ or assigning it to another.

And so it was simply to own the name of Jesus Christ was to court martyrdom. How many believers in ancient Pergamum died for their commitment to this essential truth we do not know. But the letter praises the church for its steadfast faith in Jesus. And we know that one Antipas died for his refusal to deny Christ. And so he became, according to tradition, the first Christian martyr in Asia. Tradition also claims that he was slowly roasted to death in a bronze kettle during the reign of Emperor Domitian (81-96 AD).

And yet, the Lord still had a complaint against the church in Pergamum and it behooves us to learn that in Pergamum (and I think we must assume within the church of Pergamum) there were also those who espoused the teaching of Balaam and those who held to the teaching of Nicolaitans, for these errors they needed to repent because the Balaamites and Nicolaitans espoused dangerous fallacies that misrepresented God's truth, harmed the children of God, and damaged the churches witness.

Who were these Balaamites and Nicolaitans? We certainly do not have as much information about them as we would like and much of what we assume is based on conjecture. Nevertheless, we must attempt to understand the nature of these threats to the church. We have no other information about these people or what their beliefs and practices other than what appears in the scriptures. The prevailing opinion seems to be that the Balaamites and the

Nicolaitans were probably one and the same. The only Balaam we know of appears in the book of Numbers and is a magician of sorts who was hired by the King of Moab, Balak, to call down a curse of the Israelites as they made their way to Moab toward the promised land. But instead of cursing Israel God intervened and Balaam could only bless Israel. So while Balaam may have been hired to curse God's people, he was used to bless them. Thus Balaam seems to represent those who for a price will embrace falsehood and jeopardize God's people. Balaam is revealed to be a fool and a fraud when his own donkey speaks to him and restrains him and shows that a mere beast of burden has more sense than this esteemed but corrupt hired prophet. (See Numbers 22 and 2 Peter 2:15) Balaam had also devised a wicked scheme to entice the men of Israel to be seduced more by girls of Moab, knowing that this would incur the wrath of God upon Israel. The more I ponder it, the more I suspect it may have been this association with Balaam that suggested the link to the teaching of Balaam since we know sexual immorality was a clear and present danger in Pergamum.

As for the Nicolaitans, they may have been associated somehow with Nicolaus, who was one of the seven original deacons chosen by the early church, according to Acts 6:5. However, we have no proof of this. We do know that the Nicolaitans were a problem and that they were mentioned earlier in the letter to Ephesus (2:6) as well as here in the letter to Pergamum (2:15). The next letter to Thyatira may also imply that they were a problem there as well.

At any rate, the offenses encouraged by the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans was basically two-fold. First, they encouraged the people to go ahead and consume the meat that previously had been used in pagan sacrificial rights but later was sold in the market for food. So what's the big deal, you may be thinking? The idols are nothing and why waste good food? The reason this was objectionable was because the church had established a policy at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 which was intended to show deference to Jewish converts to Christianity as the church moved out into the Gentile world. Gentile converts, it was decided, would not be required to go through all the rights of Judaism, including circumcision, prior to their reception into the church and their baptism. But for the sake of the Jewish Christians they were asked to abstain from eating food offered to idols, to abstain from meat from strangled animals where the blood was left within the meat and also to abstain from sexual immorality. This was a compromise worked out between Christians of Jewish origin and Christians committed to the expansion of the church into the Roman Empire.

Now some within the church apparently these Balaamites and Nicolaitans, may have thought these restrictions unreasonable or even inappropriate because they knew they were saved by grace and were free of the old ceremonial law and its demands. They may have felt that not even the apostles' counsel should be allowed to restrain their freedom in Christ. But the danger then as now was that freedom can degenerate into license and God's people could

well lose their distinctiveness within the culture and no longer be people who are living according to the Word of God but rather living according to the ways of the world.

Obviously, while tolerance of different ideas and different understandings of truth can be a good thing, clearly some ideas and some practices are frankly intolerable. What the church might conclude regarding Jesus' expectation of it is that we should not only be prepared to love passionately and to suffer faithfully but also be committed to seeking, defending, and being governed in God's truth. Truth matters. It mattered to the Christ and it matters to his followers.

But the problem, of course, is how do we come to understand, interpret, apply, and use the truth? Truth can be used as a weapon, you know. We can use truth to serve evil. That is why truth and love must always be balanced and held together. And that is why Paul would later write: "Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the head, that is, Christ." (Ephesians 4:15) I am also reminded of a quote from Warren Wiersbe: "Truth without love is brutality, and love without truth is hypocrisy."

Of course, we recognize that within the church believers don't always agree as to what is true and of major importance and what is of marginal importance. Through the ages the church has come to new understandings about certain aspects of the truth and how to apply these understandings to the life of faith. Our understanding of Sabbath has changed, as has our understanding of forgiveness, justice, slavery, divorce, race relations, the role of women, how they dress or wear their jewelry or even braid their hair, sexuality, and other things. What is more, we live in an age in which many people regard truth as only a matter of opinion and morality as only a matter of personal choice or lifestyle. But the Scriptures and the Christ, the word written and living, remind us that there are truths and standards which exist apart from human opinion or preference. And Christ calls his church always to remember this and to live our lives in accordance with God's truth as we're given to understand it, regardless of the world's approval or disapproval.

According to John R. W. Stott, Rupert Meldenius in the seventeenth century was quoted as saying, "We must preserve unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity in all things." Another Presbyterian denomination has embraced this as its motto. I like it. I agree with it. But I also recognize that the church has always struggled and will always struggle given new situations and new insights to determine what is essential and what is not.

This much we know---for the church of Jesus Christ in the first or twenty-first century, no truth is more essential than the profession of Jesus Christ as Lord. And the best, if not the only, defenses we have in our battle with our alien culture are the "sharp two-edged sword," meaning the Word of God and the words and witness of Jesus, or "the sword of his mouth."

And the promise to those who maintain and live by God's truth is that they will be nourished by the real manna, that is, the bread of life. And their names will appear on a white stone which will be their ticket of admission to the heavenly banquet. (Just take my word on that because there's not sufficient time to explain it!)

Now because we have just celebrated another independence Day in the country we love and value, I feel I would be remiss if I did not point out a derivative lesson that is applicable not only to the church of Jesus Christ today but to any free society like our own that was conceived in and founded on Judeo-Christian principles, some of which frankly we honored more than others. In John 8 Jesus tells his disciples, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (8:31-32)

I believe the words of Jesus here relate not only to spiritual freedom but also to political freedom. If the future and effectiveness of the Christian church depends on the truth being known, preserved and protected, how much more might the freedom of a democratic society be dependent upon an absolute commitment to knowing the truth and demanding the truth from our leaders, our essential institutions and our citizens.

As I was completing this sermon on Christ's expected and required commitment to truth as we know and understand it, I opened the Tuesday morning "News and Record" and saw the front page headline "A Time for Truth." It could be the title for today's sermon. Of course when is it not the time for truth but in a fractured and divided America we are living in today we must remember that democracies will only survive if we seek and demand and expect the truth from our leaders and from one another. What is the truth about ourselves, our history, our sense of justice, our understanding of compassion, peace, morality, and ethics? Can we be honest with ourselves and with one another?

Spencer Johnson once wrote: "Integrity is telling myself the truth, and honesty is telling the truth to other people."

And for a church, and for a nation, either of which hopes to survive, much less to thrive, a continuing commitment to serving the truth at all costs must prevail.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.