

PERGAMUM: TOLERATING FALSE DOCTRINE
Revelation 2:12-17
June 22, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

The topic of biblical church discipline, which has been called “the third pillar of the church” following that of the preaching of the Word and the practice of ordinances, is a source of much discussion today. Recently the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution on regenerate church membership framed by my good friend, Tom Ascol. This is a positive step, a directive much needed to right the ship not only in the SBC but more importantly in the life of a local church. At the heart of Ascol’s resolution are two amendments:

One called for churches “to repent of any failure among us to live up to our professed commitment to regenerate church membership and any failure to obey Jesus Christ in the practice of lovingly correcting wayward church members.” The other encouraged “denominational servants to support and encourage churches that seek to recover and implement our Savior’s teachings on church discipline, even if such efforts result in the reduction in the number of members that are reported in those churches.”¹

This clarion call for biblical church discipline is not new in Southern Baptist life. John Leadley Dagg, an early SBC leader and author of a well-known and influential church manual of the nineteenth century, noted, “It has been remarked, that when discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.” In 2005, Albert Mohler made the following comment on his daily blog:

The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the contemporary church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other.

The absence of church discipline is no longer remarkable – it is generally not even noticed. Regulative and restorative church discipline is, to many church members, no longer a meaningful category, or even a memory. The present generation of both ministers and church members is virtually without experience of biblical church discipline.²

While a resolution is not binding on any local body, Ascol’s much needed resolution, as evidenced by Mohler’s comments, serves as a wake up call to the many churches that have fallen into a faulty ecclesiology and a tolerant methodology like that of the church we look at this morning, the church at Pergamum. In the first two churches, we have seen both the bad and the good. The church at Ephesus was commended for their careful consideration of doctrine, but they were condemned for losing their focus, for taking their eyes off of their first love, Jesus Christ. We could say that the church at Ephesus was characterized by their unfaithfulness. The second church, the church at Smyrna, was a stark contrast to that of Ephesus. They were marked by their faithfulness in the midst of tribulation and, though they were considered poor according to worldly standards, they were rich in spiritual blessings according to Christ’s eternal judgment.

¹ <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=28262>, accessed 06/20/2008.

² http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2005-05-13, accessed 06/20/2008.

As we work our way through this letter, which is similar in structure to the other letters, we will see that this church is not unlike many churches today. Their city was one of the most perverse cities in Asia Minor and they had a difficult road to hoe to be a “city on a hill,” “a light shining in the darkness,” to be salt that irritates an open wound. But these difficulties left them without excuse. Because of their toleration of unbiblical doctrines and unfaithful living, this church provides an unhealthy model of a church that became *lax in biblical church discipline due to a failure to pay close attention to its doctrine and practice*.

As we have over the past few weeks, we will focus on what this letter reveals concerning our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I. His Word (2:12)

Pergamum occupied a dangerous position in the world and this letter serves as a warning to churches like them today. Unlike the church at Ephesus, they were tolerant of evil men and their doctrines. Unlike the church at Smyrna, this church would do whatever it took to make sure that there was no inner turmoil. At the expense of the Word of God and the God of the Word, Pergamum chose the path of least resistance.

That is why our Lord’s description of Himself in v. 12 is so pertinent to this church. He is identified as, “**The One who has the sharp two-edged sword.**” We typically envision a sword as being held in the hand, a weapon wielded either defensively or offensively. But that is not the case here. In the vision that this description is taken from in chapter 1, John recorded, “*Out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword*” (1:16). Later in Revelation 19:15, “From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations” and again in 19:21, “And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse.”

What then is this sharp sword which comes from the mouth of the Lord? It refers to the Word of God, the Word that the author of Hebrews described as “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12). The Apostle Paul picks up on this imagery in his description of the spiritual armor. In Ephesians 6:17 he wrote of “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

The significance of this “**sword**” was two-fold for the church at Pergamum. First, it was this very Word whose power had been neglected by them. Their tolerance for anything and everything concerning doctrine had caused the church to lose the purity of its confession. They had forgotten the “sharpness” of the Word, its power to expose the thoughts and intents of the heart. They had neglected to see the sufficiency of God’s Word as God-breathed, “and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). So Jesus introduced Himself as the Word with power to perform its specific intent, that being to perform spiritual surgery in exposing sin and restoring the soul.

Sam Storms gives a second significance of this “**sword**”:

The reference to a “sword” carried special significance for the Christians at Pergamum, given the fact that the sword was a symbol of the Roman proconsul’s total sovereignty over every area of life, especially to execute enemies of the state... This tells the church

that it is the exalted Christ, not Roman officials, who is the true judge. The ultimate power belongs to God, and nothing the pagans can do will change that.³

Both of these purposes for the “**sword**” are captured by the use of the definite article in the original Greek. Literally, the clause reads, “the One who has the sword, the double-edged one, the sharp one.”⁴ The Greek piles on the effectiveness and sufficiency of the Word’s power and purpose. As we will see next, the church at Pergamum was experiencing a power failure. This is seen in...

II. His Knowledge (2:13-15)

Christ’s knowledge is seen in both His commendation and His condemnation of this church, introduced by the common phrase in the letters, “**I know.**”

1. Commendation (v. 13)

Christ began by giving commendation where commendation was due. First, “**I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is... where Satan dwells.**” The city of Pergamum could be described as “Satan’s City” or “Sin City.” This is probably not a reference to a Satanic cult, though those might have existed, but rather to the numerous idolatrous shrines that marked the city, more so than in other places. The city is described as follows:

Pergamum was renowned for its library that eventually was transferred to Alexandria. Due to Egypt’s refusal to send them paper, they developed animal skins, known as parchment, for making more books. But of even greater renown were the multiplied temples and altars throughout the city. The city stood on a hill of more than 1000 feet, and atop the hill stood an enormous altar to Zeus Soter (Zeus Savior) surrounded by massive colonnades, giving it the appearance of a throne to the Greek god considered their savior. Teams of priests burned animal sacrifices on the great altar twenty-four hours a day, so that the rising smoke bore testimony to Zeus’ supremacy in that region. The worship of the god of healing, Asclepius Soter (whose symbol is still used to identify the field of medicine), centralized in Pergamum, where sanatoriums attached to the temples housed the sick awaiting the touch of the sacred snakes that slithered freely among them. This personified Satan, as John later refers to the devil as “the serpent of old” (12:9) [adapted from Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 35-36 and S. Kistemaker, 126]. Additionally, Pergamum had a long standing tradition as the center of emperor worship with temples dedicated for that purpose. There stood “Satan’s throne” where the church sought to testify of Christ.⁵

This is the setting for the church at Pergamum, and Christ knew it. He knew their plight, the difficulty they had in taking the gospel to such a perverse city. Certainly there had been times when they wanted to cry out, “Where are you, Lord? Have you forsaken us?” The words, “**I know where you dwell**” must have brought great encouragement to these who had been beaten down by the wickedness of their surroundings.

³ <http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/16-wonderful-words-of-life-and-death--revelation-212>, accessed 06/20/2008.

⁴ William Hendriksen, *NTC: Revelation*, 128.

⁵ Phil Newton, http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/revelation_02.08-17.html, accessed 06/21/2008.

Christ then commended them for their faithfulness in the midst of this satanic activity, **“You hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith.”** Holding **“fast My name”** involved proclaiming the Person and Work of Christ, of setting forth Christ as God incarnate and His redemptive work at Calvary, at the very foot of Satan’s throne. They did not deny their faith in Christ, even if it meant certain martyrdom, as was the case with this man named **“Antipas,”** whose life was characterized as **“My witness, My faithful one,”** even to his death. So Christ commends them for their devotion to the truth of who Christ is and in sticking to the essentials of the gospel message, even willing to die for it... to those *outside* the church. Their problem was in how they dealt with those *inside* the church. Here we see His...

2. Condemnation (vv. 14-15)

Christ continued, **“But I have a few things against you.”** Heresy had crept into the church. Errant theology had muddied their confession and become a **“stumbling block”** in the life of the church. The source of this negative and corrupting influence came from two groups. First, the church had allowed a Balaamite mentality into their midst (v. 14).

The reference to Balaam takes us back to Numbers 22-25, 31:8, 16. In brief, the Moabite king Balak sought to hire the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. Instead of cursing, the Lord constrained him to bless Israel. Since Balaam’s curses didn’t work against Israel (three times, I might add), he instead offered counsel to King Balak. They were to entice the Israelite men into immoral relationships with the Moabite women through inviting them to the idolatrous feasts of their gods. “The people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab,” we are told (Num. 25:1). The Lord brought judgment against Israel and the wayward prophet Balaam, who was killed for his part in this compromise (Num. 31:8, 16).⁶

Some at Pergamum had adopted this Balaamite heresy that a professing believer can have affections for both the world and Christ, that you can have one foot in the world and one foot in the church, remain friends with wickedness while at the same time worshipping God. Rather than fleeing from evil and abstaining from the pagan rituals and festivals, they compromised their convictions when they came together on Sunday morning and allowed all sorts of worldly devices in their worship that weakened rather than strengthened their faith in **“the One who has the sharp two-edged sword.”**

The second heresy in the church was **“the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (v. 15).** We were first introduced to this group in the letter to the church at Ephesus, who were commended for hating the deeds of this group, which Christ also hated (2:6). Such was not the case with Pergamum, who coddled their teaching rather than hating them. This sect championed Christian liberty to an extreme, teaching that physical activities such as sex and food were to be left to each individual’s interpretation. They were characterized by their sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols in the temple cults. So they, like the Balaamites, believed that they could continue in the ways of the world while worshipping Jesus Christ. And rather than deal with them according to the Word, the church tolerated their wickedness.

However, Christ would have no part in their tolerance or their compromise. We see this in His...

⁶ Phil Newton, http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/revelation_02.08-17.html, accessed 06/21/2008.

III. His Exhortation (2:16-17)

Christ commands the church to **“repent.”** The verb *to repent* occurs twelve times in the book of Revelation. Eight of them are addressed to the churches in Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis, and Laodicea, four of the five churches that Christ condemned. Interestingly, the command is not given to the church at Thyatira. We will address that church in a few weeks. The other four occurrences are in the past tense and refer to unbelievers who refused to repent, like the wicked Jezebel, who Christ discusses in His letter to Thyatira. The Christians at Pergamum are commanded by Christ to **“repent”** of their failure to discipline the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans along with their followers. They needed to understand that if Jesus hated their way, as He did the Nicolaitans, then so should they. So in the words of William Hendriksen, “He called the Christians to turn their laxity into watchfulness, to enforce spiritual discipline, and to expel from among them the Nicolaitans and their adherents.”⁷

If they failed to do so, Jesus promised to come to them quickly and **“make war against them with the sword of My mouth” (v. 17).** Some see this as a reference to His Second Coming when He will judge all things according to the **“sword.”** But Christ here refers to an imminent judgment, one like that made to Ephesus when He promised to remove their lampstand if they failed to repent (2:5). Judgment is swift when the child of God fails to repent. As a child of God they can expect righteous discipline from the Father as we saw in our lesson this morning in Hebrews 12. For those who failed to repent by exercising biblical church discipline there would be discipline from Christ, just as the judgment was swift in Numbers with the Israelites and their failure with Balaam.

And what would Christ discipline them with? His Word! Likewise, church discipline is never to be separated from His Word. That is why it is important that the church enforce *biblical* church discipline. The Word alone is profitable for rebuke and correction and instructing in the way that is right.

We then see a promise from Christ to those who did repent, to those who overcame, a promise with both present and eternal value, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some* of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.”**

The **“hidden manna”** represents Christ Himself, the Bread of Life (Jn. 6:48-51). John MacArthur suggests that this is a reference to Christ’s provision of spiritual sustenance for those who put their faith in Him, symbolizing the spiritual blessings and benefits of knowing Christ that Paul refers to in Ephesians 1:3.⁸

The **“white stone”** is a bit more mysterious. Some link it to the Urim and the Thummim on the breastplate of the high priest used to discern God’s will. If this be the case, by the **“white stone”** God promises those who overcome knowledge of His will. Another view is that the stone is a diamond, symbolizing eternal life. A similar view is that taken from Roman custom of awarding white stones to the victors in athletic contests, serving as a ticket to a special awards banquet. If that be the case, the **“white stone”** promises entrance to the heavenly banquet. Given these interpretations, it seems likely that the **“white stone”** is a promise of eternity with Christ for those who overcome. The same is true concerning **“the new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.”** This **“new name”** is given only to the true child of God, those who are called His saints.

⁷ Hendriksen, 132.

⁸ John MacArthur, *Because the Time is Near*, 69.

Conclusion

I close with an illustration from Geoff Thomas that I trust will help us understand the need for spiritual discipline according to the Word of God in the church today.

They (the church at Pergamum) were tolerating false teaching in the congregation of God's great prophet, Jesus Christ. What would you think of a family whose father had certain godly convictions but the family brought a man in to eat with them every day. He spoke at the table to the wife and children things that constantly grieved the father. He had built the house, taken the wife from poverty and made her rich, paid for the children's education and upbringing, caring deeply for them so that they lacked nothing, and yet now they brought a stranger in and listened to his sweet lies getting so excited about his opinions and changing their lives. What should such a family do? It should fall before its father and confess its sins in repentance, and throw that man out of the house and never let him nor his doctrines through the door again.⁹

That is the responsibility of the church today. While there will always remain areas where those in the body agree to disagree, when it comes to the life of the body, the essentials must remain the essentials. May we be a church that has a pure confession that leads to a holy walk, remaining ever watchful for those whose intent is to shred that confession, undermine the name of Christ, and become a stumbling block to our living faith in Christ. May we guard our doors from allowing worldly influences into our midst, wolves in sheep clothing from their destructive influences. May we be a church that models biblical church discipline and not the tolerance of Pergamum.

⁹ <http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/sermons/rev1.htm>, accessed 06/21/2008/