

Followers of the Way

Pergamum – No Compromise!

Steve Campbell 15-10-23

Esther 3:1-6, Rev 2:12-17

Keith Green was an American Christian singer/songwriter, who sadly died in a plane crash with two of his children when he was only 28 years old! In that very short life, he left an incredible legacy of Christian songs, including his second studio album, entitled 'No Compromise'.

The title is taken from the song, "Make my life a prayer to You, I wanna do what You want me to. No empty words and no white lies, no token prayers, **no compromise.**" And the album cover features a scene from Esther where Mordecai refused to bow to Haman.

I have chosen the title 'No Compromise' for this letter to the third Church of Revelation, Pergamum. As with all the Churches addressed in Revelation, you can visit the ruins of Pergamum. The cities lie in an almost circular route, starting with Ephesus, perhaps the Mother Church, and moving in a clockwise direction you come to each in turn. Pergamum is the most northerly of the cities. Whilst Ephesus was much larger and more cosmopolitan in nature, Pergamum was the seat of government, being the capital of the Roman province of Asia. So, if Ephesus was the New York of its day, Pergamum was Washington DC. It was a pro-consular province governed by a high level official, whose symbol was the sword. This showed the governor carried the authority of state, including the power of execution.

How appropriate then that Jesus identified Himself as one with the double-edged sword. When John first saw the vision of the Risen Lord Jesus in Ch.1:16, 'coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword.' Jesus' authority is His word. In His letter to Pergamum, Christ offers the church there both a commendation and a condemnation, before issuing a challenge and promising a reward.

1. Commendation

Jesus addresses the Church thus, 'I know where you live ... where Satan lives ...where Satan has his throne.' (12-13) This surely must have reassured these Christians that they were not alone or abandoned; Jesus knew all about them and the trials and temptations they were facing. But why is this where Satan's throne was? The Romans worshipped many pagan gods and there were many temples and altars dedicated to the pantheon of gods in the city. But there was also something called the Cult of the Emperor, where the Caesar himself was declared to be a god and worshipped as such. The first temple dedicated to a living Emperor as god, Caesar Augustus, **was built in Pergamum in 29BC.**

All citizens were expected to offer a pinch of incense and proclaim, 'Caesar is Lord', especially when entering the Agora, the market place, to trade. This caused a problem for Christians who knew that only Jesus Christ is Lord – as stated in the earliest Christian Creed. Jesus Himself said, 'You cannot serve two masters'. (Matt 6:24) The believers at Pergamum refused to compromise and they were

persecuted, with one of their members, Antipas, losing his life. Yet even then the Church did not succumb and remained true to the name of Christ, the only Lord, and did not renounce its faith in Him.

Antipas was a hero, held in high esteem not only by the Church, but also by Christ Himself. He calls him, in v.13, 'my faithful witness', literally martyr. This is significant, because as John begins writing to the seven Churches, this is how he describes Jesus – Rev 1:4-5.

Jesus describes Antipas using the same words – so this man displayed Christ-like qualities which the rest of the congregation were emulating, refusing to bow to state pressure.

Our friend Charalee told us about the Martyr's Memorial in Oxford, commemorating the deaths of Bishops Latimer and Ridley, and Archbishop Cranmer. These faithful Church leaders refused to compromise when Queen Mary turned the CofE back to Roman Catholicism, and away from the Protestant Reformation.

If you visit Pergamum today you will see many ruins of the temples and altars dedicated to emperors and pagan gods. You will not, however, find a memorial to the martyr Antipas, as there is in Oxford to the martyred bishops. So where is his memorial? Here in Scripture, which has endured much longer than those ruins in Pergamum. We may forget the names of most of the pagan gods and emperors, but Jesus does not forget the name of one martyr; either then or now.

So the Christians in Pergamum remained true to the name of Christ, their only Lord and Saviour, and didn't renounce their faith in Him by bowing to the state enforced Cult of the Emperor, with its satanic origins – 'where Satan has his throne'. And, for this, they were highly commended.

2. Condemnation

Not all was good, however, as Jesus now outlines what He holds against them – vv.14-15

'Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: there are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.'

John's first readers or hearers in Pergamum would have been aware of the story of Balaam and Balak, as the Scriptures (OT) were read in the Church, as in the synagogue. The story from Numbers refers to the Moabite king Balak, who hired the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites – but every time he opened his mouth, a blessing came out. So Balaam advised Balak to get Moabite women to entice Israelite men into sexual immorality and idolatry. As a result 24,000 perished (Numbers 25).

This occurred in the 15th century BC – so what has this to do with Pergamum in 1st century AD?

To be a successful tradesman or merchant in a Roman city one needed to part of a guild; this was how you networked, made contacts, increased your client base (a bit like the Freemasons). Membership of these guilds brought great benefit, but as they were dedicated to various pagan gods, you were expected to participate in the religious rituals, including eating meat sacrificed to the idol, and indulge in sexual immorality with the temple prostitutes.

The Church did not compromise with the state sponsored idolatry of Emperor worship in order to save their lives, but some were indulging in these other forms of idolatry in order to save their livelihoods. Jesus also mentions the Nicolaitans in these verses, whom we heard of in Ephesus; but whereas there they were commended for hating their practices, which Jesus also does, there were in Pergamum those who held to them.

The Nicolaitans, a proto Gnostic sect, were thought to originate with Nicolas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism and one of the seven deacons mentioned in Acts 6. Their practice was to justify the eating of food sacrificed by idols, and indulging in sexual immorality, by twisting Scripture to suit their own ends. They were condemned by the early Church Fathers as heretics. For example, Irenaeus wrote: 'They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence'. The character of these men is further very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John, as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practice adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.¹

Across the world our brothers and sisters could very well be faced with this kind of situation, where they live in a culture that is idolatrous – animism or Hinduism – or where the vast majority belong to a different religion, like Islam or Buddhism. Here in the West it is somewhat different. Many of us have come out of a situation where an individual Church or denomination has compromised.

In the West, the temptation is not so much to do with pagan idolatry, as in Pergamum, yet there is pressure to conform to the accepted narrative from both the government and prevailing culture – LGBT, trans-rights, abortion etc. For example – the CofE bishops are determined to push through prayers of blessing for same-sex couples. Many conservative Christians, clergy and lay, are fearful there will be no room for them in the Church they love and they will be pressurised to adapt, conform, compromise.

I was watching a video, by an Ulsterman of all people, which contrasted the fastest growing denomination with the one in greatest decline. A journalist had visited both in turn and gave his findings. The Elim Pentecostal, which is the fastest growing in the UK, focused very much on evangelism, spreading the Good News of Jesus, training and encouraging their congregation in this ministry. The Church in decline had a reading on forgiveness, and the minister began by saying, 'This is a contentious subject. But we can begin almost immediately by asking forgiveness for how we buy into containing and using God.'

What are the ways that we contain and use God? It is, of course, quote, 'pronouns.' Apparently, the minister said, 'I'm not asking people to be on the same journey, but I am trying to be intentional about not using "he" or "she" or "it" or "they" to identify God, not limiting our language in identifying a God that is limitless.'

What is this second Church? Not the CofE, but the United Reformed Church. No wonder it is the fastest declining Church in UK, having bought into the woke ideology, with numbers dropping from 100,000 in 1995 to under 40,000 today. If trends continue, it will be extinct by 2038. As Dean Inge once said, 'The church that weds the spirit of this age will find herself a widow in the next.'

Followers of the Way will not compromise. We, like Antipas the faithful witness and those in Pergamum, remain true to the name of Christ and will not renounce our faith in Him. Satan is behind every attempt to get Christians to conform or compromise, be it through the government, prevailing culture, or even the so-called 'Church.'

But the faithful cry out – 'No compromise!'

Those who *have* compromised must repent, or else Jesus will come and fight against them with the sword of His mouth. In other words, rather than fearing the sword of Caesar, they need to fear Christ's sword, who will condemn them by His word.

¹ [Irenaeus, Adversus haereses, i. 26, §3](#)

To those who remain true and overcome, Jesus gives a wonderful promise in v.17 – They will be given some of the hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it.

Various interpretations have been offered on this verse. But surely the hidden manna, which was kept in a jar in the Ark of the Covenant, refers to God's provision for the Israelites during 40 years in the wilderness? Jesus, who is the bread of life, is promising to provide for His faithful followers, even if they lose their livelihood by refusing to participate in the pagan rituals. And the white stone? Well white, of course, signifies purity, and stones were often used in those days as a ticket to enter into a banquet. Jesus' faithful followers will be invited into the heavenly banquet at the end of the age.

And what of the new name? This may show what an intimate relationship we have with God. Very often the Lord gave those He loved a new name: Abram / Abraham, Jacob / Israel. And Jesus did the same thing: Simon/Peter So when we arrive at the heavenly banquet, we too may have a new, unique name given us by our Lord.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen.