

“Standing out in Pergamum and Zurich”

Revelations 2:12-17

12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

13 “‘I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith[b] even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.**14** But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. **15** So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. **16** Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. **17** He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’

Sam had planned to begin the book of Daniel tonight and start with a sermon about standing out as God’s people in ancient Babylon.

Since I'm jumping in at the last moment,
I wanted to share something that resonates with Sam’s theme
without just preaching *his* sermon.
So I dusted off my notes
on one of the letters to the 7 churches
of Asia minor at the beginning of Revelation.
We’ll look together at the letter from Jesus
to the church in first-century Pergamum,
and think together about what it might mean
to be willing to stand out,
following Christ, in 21st Century Zurich.

Introduction

Last summer I had a chance to travel
through Western Europe for about a month---
My first time seeing many amazing places.
I was theoretically on my way
to a graduate school conference in England.
But let’s be honest, I was a tourist, more than a student.

Many people asked:
 what was the highlight?
 What was your favorite thing?

It was two things:
 the overwhelming natural beauty of Iceland,
 and the Bodleian Library at Oxford University.

At the Bodleian, books used to be chained to the wall
 so no one would take them out of the library--
 so valuable were the books.

King Charles I thought there might be an exception
 to the no-lending policy, but he was wrong.
 Instead, the library built him a special study carrel.

Pergamum, Oxford, Zurich?

If I was living in the time John wrote his apocalypse,
 and I was on a dubious study-vacation,
 I would probably say that the 2 best parts
 of a trip to Asia minor
 would be the natural beauty of the Mediterranean coast,
 and the Library at Pergamum.

At the time, it was the 2nd largest library in the world
 with 200,000 volumes.
 It wasn't till the mid-nineteenth century
 that the Bodleian Library in Oxford had 200,000 volumes.

When I visited Oxford, my advisor,
 who didn't go to Oxford or Cambridge,
 Joked with me that Christ came to destroy evil,
 powerful institutions like Oxford University.

All joking aside,
 when John revealed Christ's will to the church at Pergamum, Pergamum was the
 'Oxford' (we might say) of the Roman empire.
 Both places signify the power of the secular sword:

Christian martyrs were executed at Oxford;

Christian martyrs lost their lives at Pergamum.

Both places obviously signify the gathered wisdom of the wise in their libraries.

And insofar as the cultures and governments and institutions opposed the reign of Christ and the peace of his church, both places were, as Jesus says of Pergamum, the place where Satan's throne is, where he dwells.

Jesus Commends Pergamum's Church

Despite all these cultural and institutional pressures, Jesus commends the church in Pergamum for their robust faithful public witness--- despite the martyrdom of some.

They held fast and were faithful witnesses, miniature Christ's (remember, he's called "the faithful witness").

They have not denied him.

In that sense, they have learned from Peter's denial and restoration, and have stood fast together in ways that he, before the resurrection, wasn't able to.

Jesus Calls Pergamum's Church to Repentance and Faithfulness

But Jesus also has a charge against the church at Pergamum. As often in apocalyptic literature and in the book of Revelation, the language is symbolic.

We don't know *precisely* what the teaching of Balaam represents.

Scholars I think correctly suggest that the teaching is a matter of *practice*.

It's wrong and it leads people astray---

not necessarily about the nature of God or the divinity of Christ, those matters of theology---

but it leads people astray in the outworking of their Christian lives.

It was a teaching, most likely, that justified immoral actions, that was permissive, that reeked of the corrupt ways of the culture

rather than spreading the aroma of Christ.

How is it that a church can on the one hand be commended for resolute faithfulness in the face of persecution, *while at the same time* it can be condemned for a compromising flirtation with idolatry?
A permissiveness and a resoluteness at the same time!

Contemporary Pergamums

Let's think about this together.

In what ways might churches today be simultaneously praiseworthy and condemnable?
There are numerous ways, but here are a few suggestions:

Are there churches that stand bravely against the gathered dark powers of our present evil age,
by condemning sexual immorality,
even if they are warned that their orthodoxy is technically 'hate speech'
and that they may be prosecuted for such;
while at the same time such churches bow to the cultural idol that wealth and status automatically determine fitness to serve in leadership in the church?

Absolutely, and I've been a member of such churches.
The bigger the steeple, the closer to the city center,
and the more doctors and lawyers in the congregation,
the more of a temptation it is to bow to what DH Lawrence vividly described as "the bitch goddess of success."

Is it possible to be orthodox in doctrine
and catch flack for orthodoxy from the surrounding community,
while elevating spiritually unfit people
to the offices of Deacon and Elder (and even pastor)
because they are successful?
It's not just possible theoretically; it happens, and I've seen it.

Other churches will actually be even more similar to the church in Pergamum.
I think of Tim Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NYC.

Is NYC the Babylon or the Rome of the present age?
Maybe.

Redeemer has thrived there in the midst of secularism and hedonism. They're not persecuted directly like Pergamum
But the favor they have in the city
is certainly not *because* of their orthodoxy.

And yet, Tim Keller has spoken of the sexual habits of many young people in Redeemer Church.

He says that whenever a young person comes to him
and tells him that they're not feeling close to God
or that they're struggling with issues of faith and science
or faith and philosophy,
he could--though he doesn't--
simply ask them
"so, who are you sleeping with?"
And 9 times out of 10 they would say "how did you know?"

Keller says that when your conscience is troubled,
You're more likely to doubt your faith.
And he goes so far as to say
that the *majority* of single people *in the Christian church* in a place like NYC
are sleeping with someone.
Public witness: strong;
winsome articulation of orthodox faith: strong;
private holiness in sexuality: weak and permissive.
Like Pergamum.

The two-edged sword of Jesus

Jesus says that he is the one with the sharp two-edged sword,
and that it's the sword of his mouth, verse 16.
In fact, an overly-literal translation might say
it's a "two-mouthed" sword.

The emphasis seems to be not that Jesus talks a lot,
or speaks extra harshly to his enemies,
but rather than we must never forget that his word,
his verdicts, his vindications of the righteous,

his condemnation of the unjust,
and his declaration that he is not ashamed to call us his brothers---
these are powerful and absolutely certain speech-acts.

JL Austin wrote a book about speech-acts called
“how to do things with words.”

Jesus, more than any other, *does things with words*.

And when Jesus calls himself the bearer of the two-edged sword,
he’s probably also suggesting
that he has far more zeal for the holiness of his people
than Phineas had when he bore the sword of the Lord in Numbers
and became the instrument of judgment on the people for their sin.

Roman culture had a concept of “the right of the sword”---
and only certain authorities in certain locales
had this kind of power within the empire.

Pergamum was one of those places.

Readers would have picked up on this phrase immediately.

Jesus is contesting their claim to have the true “right of the sword.”

Caesar and Jesus: Who is Lord?

And so part of what Jesus says by the Spirit to this church
(and the others who are ‘overhearing’ his letter to them)

is that yes, you are right,

dear First Church of Pergamum:

Jesus is Lord and not Caesar.

But, on the other hand,

he’s also saying at the same time to the First Church of Pergamum, Hey! *Jesus* is
Lord, not Caesar!

Sometimes it’s easier to oppose a top-down leader in authority,
a Caesar who has his image everywhere---

on coins, seals, and signs---

than it is to oppose the Caesarean *culture*

and the caesarian *cult*

that ends up being even more ubiquitous than his literal image.

Caesar the person can only be in one place at a time,

and so he spreads himself and his claims to sovereignty out by sticking his head on coins.

But Cesarean culture can seep into a church the way that cigarette smoke comes into your apartment from the smoker on the balcony on the floor below.

Softness to His Correction

This reality and this warning from Jesus is not meant to intimidate or to scare us. Jesus warns but isn't one to resort to pathetic scare tactics. Jesus tells us that we must repent-- regularly and consistently-- of the various ways in which our vigilance for his lordship is not enough to keep the culture of Caesar and Satan out of the life of our church cultures.

I think that the aim of Jesus here is to create in the church at Pergamum and in Zurich a culture of repentance from now until we are completely purified in the New Creation.

Instead of cocksureness, we need humility. Instead of looking down our noses at churches that are less orthodox, or smaller, or less active, we should be in the habit of asking ourselves regularly, "where have we allowed a Caesarean, even a Satanic, spirit to creep into our hearts and into the culture of our congregation?"

One of the most memorable days of my Christian life was when my pastor Sinclair Ferguson was leading the elders meeting at First Church Columbia, SC. He told the elders---powerful, grey-suited aristocratic types--- that his desire was for the elders to take a part of their time at the beginning of their meetings to seriously read the NT.

And that his hope and prayer was that every time they read one of the imperatives---

one of the commands---in the NT,
 that someone would say
 “STOP! WAIT!
 Let’s go no further
 until we figure out what it would mean
 for our church to repent and obey this command
 of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

A repentant church will still have their sins
 exposed by the Lord Jesus.
 But a repentant church will be one in which
 the lordship of Jesus has such sway
 that the church is able to experience regularly
 the joys of his commendations,
 and one in which they will not have to fear the sorrows
 of his ultimate condemnation.

And guess what.
 A repentant church is full of repentant churchmen and churchwomen,
 repentant children of the covenant of grace.

And so while Jesus by the Spirit addresses us corporately today,
 he also addresses us each as those who are by our influence responsible for the
 collective culture of our church.
 Not to mention the cultures of our families and friends and workplaces.

Are we as individual Christians outwardly and publicly
 robust in our orthodoxy
 but subtly and sneakily receptive
 to anti-Christian words, actions, and attitudes
 with which we pollute the atmosphere
 of the church for whom Jesus shed his precious blood?

God help us each become repentant people
 so that our words and actions and attitudes
 are full of humility, grace, savory of Christ,
 God help us be rid of those words, actions, and attitudes
 that backhandedly and unwittingly declare that,
 actually, Caesar is lord!

Cutting to Heal

The wonderful thing about the sharpness
of the words of Jesus is that,
if our hearts are soft, individually;
if our heart as a church family is soft;
the sharpness of Jesus's incisive rebuke to us
can cut to heal.

Jesus, with the sword of his word, can cut *away*
the overtly and the subtly rebellious parts of our hearts;
the overtly and subtly loyal-to-Caesar bits of our church culture.

The Word of Jesus never returns to him void.
For those who love him and are called according to his purpose,
if he wounds, he wounds to heal;
if he rebukes, he rebukes not to condemn but to save.

The result is that,
for the true Christian and the true Christian church,
the response to the often hard-to-hear word of the Lord against our sin is not just
sorrow, but thankfulness.

The heart's cry is not only:
"Oh, Lord, it hurts so much to learn the ways
that I have hurt your heart and hurt your witness."

But also:
"Oh Lord, it is so very good
to be able to identify this area of infection and sin
in my heart and life, in our hearts and lives together,
and to have it cut away from me, from us.
Lord Jesus, cut it away.
And please get it all.

"And when you're done, find something else to cut away
in order that I, that we,
might be fully healed and restored
to a place where our witness is sure
and authentic and holistic:

so that each part of our hearts, minds, and lives
conspire together to bear one genuine witness
to *your* Lordship instead of *Caesar's* or anyone else's."

Hidden Rewards

And perhaps you've noticed that in these letters, the Lord Jesus holds forth a
promise, a reward, for those who by his grace overcome.

In this case, the reward is 2 things that are in a sense *hidden* from the public eye,
but *given* to the overcomer.

The manna is *hidden* manna,
and the white stone has a name only known to the recipient.

What is this hidden manna?

Well, of course it refers to the bread
that was given to God's pilgrim people in the desert.
It wasn't exciting, but it sustained them.

In John 6 this same Lord Jesus
tells us that *he* is the bread of life,
better able to sustain us in our pilgrimage home
than the manna in the wilderness.

If we commit ourselves to lives of repentance
and faithful witness-bearing;
if we commit ourselves unreservedly to Jesus,
he promises to reward us with himself in his fullness.

The reward for increasingly unrestricted allegiance to Jesus
is bottomless gulps
of the love and intimacy of Jesus himself.

And what about this white stone?

The priests used to go into the holy place
to meet intimately with Yahweh,
with stones with the names of the 12 tribes on their breastpiece---
symbolically bearing the names of every Israelite with them.

So some interpreters think
it's the believer's own name that's on the stone.
Others think it's the name of Christ.

Either way, the point is clear:
 There is something intimate
 between each believer and Christ,
 and between each church and Christ,
 that is not public.

That secret, it seems, might be something more,
 but it's certainly not something less,
 than his own mouth's declaration that he loves you,
 that you are his,
 and he is yours, forever.

You see, in the end, all other religions and secularities
 promise stuff and power in return for allegiance.

Only the Lord Jesus,
 more than the glories of the New Jerusalem,
 the crown of righteousness,
 and all the other rewards
 that he will give his faithful friends on the last day---

only Jesus ultimately offers,
 as the prize for faithfulness,
more and more and more of himself.

When you and I renounce,
 and when our church renounces,
 the ways of the world---
 the ambition for unrestricted money, sex, and power---
 what we get in exchange is a joyful friendship with,
 and joyful service to,
 the one who owns the cattle on a thousand hills,
 the one who created the human body and its sexual capacities,
 and the one who wields unlimited power
 wisely and generously in the service of his beloved bride,
 the church.

I think the main point of this passage
 is like the main point of most parts of the Bible, in the end:
 Isn't it the most wonderful thing to be a Christian believer?