

The Character of a Compromising Church

Scripture: Revelation 2:12-17

Code: B230626

When God delivered the Israelites from Egypt, He did not merely release them from slavery under Pharaoh; He rescued them from the corrupting influences of Egypt's paganism.

Egyptians worshiped a virtually infinite collection of deities. And for centuries, the Israelites lived in close proximity to the madness of Egypt's idolatry, intimately familiar with all their pagan rituals.

Over time, Israel's concept of worship was clouded and distorted. Although they declared their allegiance to God by obeying His commands for the first Passover (Exodus 12:1–13), they were influenced by polytheistic paganism. Even after their miraculous delivery from Egypt through the Red Sea on dry land, the hearts and minds of Israel were still caught in the snare of idolatry. That's why when Moses did not immediately return from Mount Sinai, Aaron and the Israelites panicked and fashioned a golden calf to serve as their new god (Exodus 32:1–4).

To establish His Law and His pattern for acceptable worship, and to break the chains of paganism's lingering influence among His people, God gave Israel the book of Leviticus. Over and over, it stresses the need for personal holiness and pure worship. Leviticus 18:1–5 is the heart of the book. In these verses, God delivers His fundamental commands to reject the practices of the surrounding pagan nations:

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'I am the Lord your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the Lord your God. So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord.'"

This is God laying claim to His own. He's basically saying, "You cannot continue after the pattern of the pagan nations. You will worship Me alone." The subsequent verses spell out specific prohibitions against the immorality that constituted much of pagan worship—adultery, homosexuality, incest, bestiality, and child sacrifice. Those vile perversions were everyday activities in Egypt, Canaan, and every other culture dominated by paganism.

This is a call for spiritual separation; to be wholly distinct and divided from the wickedness of the world's system. The Lord demands pure worship. He demands single-minded devotion. God commanded Israel to be separated from the corrupting influences of the world.

And He desires the same separation for His church.

The term *worldliness* sounds archaic to many in the church today. They dismiss it as a concern for a less-enlightened time, back when card games and dancing were considered major threats to the sanctity and purity of the church. In fact, some believers are so enamored with their freedom in Christ that they view any discussion of worldliness as a worn-out, legalistic imposition—in spite of the clear statement from heaven that “friendship with the world is hostility [hatred] toward God” and that “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

Instead, the church today works incredibly hard to appear as much like the culture as possible. For decades, it has been popular for church leaders to make their services look, sound, and feel exactly like secular gatherings and events. Many churches today are indistinguishable from the concert venues and theaters of the world. They fastidiously imitate the latest pop-culture trends, desperate to seem relevant and cool.

Such events are built on a philosophy of pragmatism: If it produces the desired effect, they’ll do it. The result is a church that is sinner-friendly—not God-friendly, and certainly not sinner-frightening. It’s a show built in the image of the pagan world. And as the world grows increasingly hostile to the gospel, the sinner-friendly church must compromise more and more to maintain its attractiveness. Leery of offending anyone, they emphasize physical and emotional [experience](#), not spiritual worship; superficial affirmation, not conviction; sentimentality, not theology; entertainment, not edification; and frivolity, not solemnity.

Worse still, they’re petrified of rejection and persecution, so they will always fall in line with the world’s expectations and ever-changing social norms. Many churches today turn a blind eye to sexual immorality; others won’t talk about sin *at all*. They ignore the topic, occasionally focusing on troublesome issues in life but never declaring the power, presence, and destructive damage of sin or naming it as an offense to God’s holiness requiring judgment. It’s a therapeutic church culture, designed to make sinners feel comfortable, welcome, and validated at any cost.

But worldliness does not make the gospel look attractive; it makes it look impotent. These churches need to realize the grave disservice they are doing to the cause of Christ and the progress of the gospel. A church that’s just like the world has nothing to offer to the world—it’s merely another mode of disposable entertainment. And how could they think such worldliness could be offered to God as worship?

Scripture tells us this is not a new phenomenon. Since the earliest days of the church, believers have caved under pressure to accommodate the world. Christ’s letter to the church at Pergamum in Revelation establishes the severe dangers of such compromise.

A Church in the Crosshairs

Pergamum was the capital city of Asia Minor, situated about a hundred miles north of Ephesus. Scripture doesn’t tell us when the church there was founded. It could have been during Paul’s second missionary journey, when he passed through the nearby region of Mysia (Acts 16:7–8). More likely, it was founded during his ministry in Ephesus, as the gospel spread rapidly from that church throughout Asia Minor (Acts 19:10).

In the apostle John's day, Pergamum saw itself as a defender of Greek culture in Asia Minor. It boasted temples dedicated to Zeus, Athena, Asclepius, and Dionysos. However, the city was dominated by emperor worship. In honor of Emperor Augustus, Pergamum built the first temple devoted to the cultic religion in 29 BC. Two more would follow, to Trajan and Septimus Severus. Pergamum held a fervent religious devotion to Rome and its emperor. In neighboring cities, Christians faced danger and persecution annually if they failed to make the yearly sacrifice to Caesar. It was a daily threat in Pergamum.

While the church in Pergamum was in great danger from the world, it was in even greater danger from the Lord. Unlike the letters to Ephesus and Smyrna, Christ's letter to Pergamum starts with a threat. The Lord identifies Himself as "the One who has the sharp two-edged sword" (Revelation 2:12). This is not a comforting salutation. It's an immediate warning, meant to evoke the same terror it inspired in the apostle John in his initial vision (Revelation 1:17). Christ is coming in judgment, wielding His Word like a mighty broadsword—a sword that has no dull edges (see Hebrews 4:12). Later in Revelation, John tells us this is how the unrepentant world will see Christ when He comes in His final judgment: "From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty" (Revelation 19:15). That is the same Lord who is writing to the church at Pergamum.

However, He includes a note of commendation. Although the Pergamum church was guilty of compromise with the world, it was not bereft of faithful believers. The Lord says, "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells" (Revelation 2:13).

Historians and commentators offer some suggestions regarding what the Lord was referring to as "Satan's throne." Pergamum was home to a massive altar to Zeus, the king of the gods. The huge structure dominated the city's acropolis. Describing its massive scale, Edwin Yamauchi writes, "The word *altar* is somewhat misleading. The structure is a monumental colonnaded court in the form of a horseshoe, 120 by 112 feet. The podium of the altar was nearly 18 feet high. The great frieze, which ran at the base of the structure for 446 feet, depicted a gigantomachy, that is, a battle of the gods and the giants. It was one of the greatest works of Hellenistic art." [1]*New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 35-36.*

Certainly, such a grand monument to Zeus—but in reality, dedicated to the devil—could have served as Satan's throne.

Others believe it is a reference to the shrine of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, who was depicted as a snake. The temple in his honor was overrun with nonpoisonous snakes that supposedly imparted his healing power. Pilgrims would travel from all over the region to worship in the temple, which involved lying or sleeping on the ground among the snakes. Since Satan is repeatedly depicted as a serpent in John's visions (Revelation 12:9, 14, 15; 20:2), this could have been an early instance of that imagery.

It could also be a reference to the dominating cult of emperor worship, which was the most powerful religious influence in the city and posed the greatest opposition to believers. Simply declining to repeat the phrase "Caesar is Lord" could lead to death. The exclusivity of the gospel made Christians

a target for Rome's most fastidious supplicants. "Satan's throne" may simply be referring to the true power behind the cult of Caesar.

Any or all of those features of Pergamum's paganism could justify the reference to Satan's throne. And the multitude of potential locations lends further credence to Christ's claim that Pergamum was the city "where Satan dwells." In that sense, it could also be a general reference to Satan's preeminence throughout the city in its various strains of pagan idolatry. The inhabitants of Pergamum thought they observed a diverse collection of gods and goddesses. We know they were only worshiping the devil (1 Corinthians 10:20).

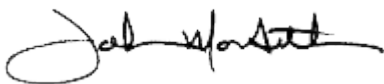
In spite of the Satanic religion that dominated the city, the Lord notes that the believers in Pergamum "hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you" (Revelation 2:13). They clung to the Savior. Like John, who was exiled "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9), the church never wavered in their commitment to Christ. They refused to deny the faith.

But that steadfast commitment to the gospel was costly in the ancient pagan world. The "days of Antipas" likely referred to a period of fierce persecution for the church. Scripture doesn't tell us anything else about Antipas, but his name was instantly familiar to the believers in Pergamum. The word translated "witness" became synonymous with believers whose witness for Christ cost them their lives, giving us the transliterated English word *martyr*. Tradition holds that Antipas was a leader in the church, and that he was roasted to death inside a brass bull during Domitian's campaign of persecution. Regardless of how Antipas was murdered, Christ singles out and commends his exemplary faithfulness unto death.

It's worth noting the possessive pronoun the Lord employs throughout Revelation 2:13: "You hold fast *My* name, and did not deny *My* faith even in the days of Antipas, *My* witness, *My* faithful one" (emphasis added). Christ has a claim on this church; it belongs to Him.

And that further emphasizes what an egregious sin their compromise was.

Next time, we will look closely at the rest of Christ's words to Pergamum in order to understand exactly where their compromise began.



(Adapted from [Christ's Call to Reform the Church](#))

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