

Christ's Letter to the Churches: Pergamos

Don Fortner | Added: Dec 28, 2005 | Category: Theology

And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.

Revelation 2:12-17

Pergamos means 'exalted, lofty, or elevated'. It was a city in Asia Minor, which was built on a huge rocky hill. The Romans made it the capital of the province. In Pergamos, Aesculapius, the pagan god of healing, was worshipped. The emblem of this god was a serpent, which to the people of God is the very emblem and symbol of Satan. Therefore, our Lord called Pergamos the place 'where Satan's seat is'. The great altar to the Greek god Zeus was also in this city, as were many other pagan altars to pagan gods. In addition to these things, Pergamos was a centre of emperor worship. Temples were dedicated to the worship of Caesar.

All men, including the disciples of Christ, were expected to offer incense to the emperor's image and say 'Caesar is Lord'. Those who refused to do so suffered great hardship and persecution for their fidelity to Christ. One example was a man named Antipas, a faithful man, who suffered martyrdom because he would not deny Christ.

The majority of those who were members of the church in Pergamos were

faithful. They held fast the name of Christ and would not deny His faith. But there were a few, even there, who tried to straddle the fence. Though they claimed to be Christians, they were willing to compromise with the pagans. They followed the doctrine of Balaam. In order to avoid persecution they tried to remove the offense of the cross by incorporating the worship of pagans into the worship of Christ. They would offer incense to Caesar, eat meat in the temple of Aesculapius, pay homage to Zeus, and then come to worship with the people of God on Sunday.

Others in the church went beyond the doctrine of Balaam. They followed the licentious practices of the Nicolaitanes. These Nicolaitanes were base antinomians. They openly taught and practised fornication and adultery, and shared their wives with one another. In a word, they lived and acted like pagans, but called themselves Christians.

Notice the character under which our Lord Jesus Christ presents Himself to the church at Pergamos. 'Those things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges' (v. 12). Christ stands before the door of His church with a sword drawn and ready to do battle. The sharp, double-edged sword with which the Son of God does battle is the Word of God. There are two reasons for this picture.

First, Christ will destroy those who defile His name. He speaks to those in the church who hold the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, and says, 'Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth' (v. 16).

Notice He says, 'I will fight against them.' Not against my church, but against them who are in my church but have forsaken me. There is a parallel passage in Matthew 3:12. John the Baptist tells us that Christ's 'fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'

Christ's love for His church is manifest by His judgement against the traitors within her walls. The Word of God is a sword of judgement and destruction to hypocrites. By the preaching of the Word, our Lord disciplines His church, separates the wheat from the chaff, and binds up the tares for the burning (Matthew 13:30). He turns His sword against those within the church who have no right to be there. Such a sight should make every hypocrite tremble; but nothing makes hypocrites tremble.

Second, Christ presents Himself here as a man of war, with His sword drawn, to comfort and defend His church. He is saying to the faithful, 'I will defend you, I will fight off those who attack you, I will destroy your enemies, and I will purge you of all those wicked men within who would defile you.' The Lord Jesus is our Joshua. He will chase the enemy before us, and lead us onward, conquering and to conquer. Thus, in this letter our Lord encourages us to persevere in the faith of the gospel.

THE NAME OF CHRIST AND THE FAITH OF CHRIST

The passage shows us that the name of Christ and the faith of Christ are one. Our Lord says, 'Thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith' (v. 13). These two things are identical. They can never be separated. The faith of the gospel has Christ for its centre, Christ for its circumference, and Christ for its substance. The name of Christ, that is His Person, His character, His work, and His teachings, is the faith of the gospel.

The great doctrines of the gospel are all intimately connected with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. They are the rays; and He is the Sun. We never hold the faith of Christ, except as we hold Jesus Christ Himself as the centre and object of that faith. In the faith of the gospel Jesus Christ is all and in all.

Election is God's choosing us in Christ before the world was made. Redemption is God purchasing His elect out of the hands of His own law by the blood of Christ. Regeneration is God giving dead sinners life in Christ, and Christ living in us. Forgiveness is God pardoning our sins through the blood of Christ. Justification is God clothing us with and imputing to us the righteousness of Christ. Sanctification is God forming Christ in us, imparting His righteousness to us. Resurrection is God raising us up by the power of Christ. Glorification is God conforming us to the image of Christ, to which end we were predestinated in the eternal purpose of His grace.

To the Jews the law was never in its proper place until it was laid in the ark, and covered with the mercy seat. And it is still true with us. We never see the law properly until we see it fulfilled in Christ. The same is true of the gospel. The gospel is the golden ring of our faith; but Christ is the diamond setting in the ring. Christ is the Author and Finisher of our faith. He is the sum and the substance, the top and the bottom, the Alpha and the Omega of the faith of the gospel. When we hold fast the name of Christ we have not denied the faith.

DENYING THE FAITH

Our Lord tells us that there are many who do deny the faith. In Pergamos there were some who held the doctrine of Balaam and others the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. In doing so they had both denied the name of Christ and the faith of the gospel. This is a painful fact, but it is a fact, and one that we have to face. In every local church there are some who will, for one reason or another, deny the faith. How do men and women deny Christ and His faith?

Many let go of Christ's name and deny His faith by simply refusing to confess it. Secret disciples are always suspect disciples. Those who confess Christ and the faith of the gospel only among His friends have, by their silence, denied Him (Matthew 10:27, 32, 33). Those who know the truth, but refuse to confess the truth in the teeth of Christ's enemies, deny the

truth.

Many, in this age of self-serving pragmatism say, 'I do not think we should offend people, or try to shove anything down their throats. We must try to get along.' Are you of that opinion? This is what the Son of God says about the matter: — 'I came not to send peace, but a sword' (Matthew 10:34). 'He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad' (Matthew 12:30). 'And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:27). If we are Christ's disciples, sooner or later, He will see to it that we confess Him before men, even before His enemies. The time will come when Nicodemus will identify himself with his Lord (John 7:50-51) and Joseph will openly own his Master (John 19:38).

Others let go of Christ and deny His faith by embracing false doctrine. In Pergamos some had embraced the doctrine of Balaam and others the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. Neither was an open denial of the gospel, but both were a practical denial of it.

The doctrine of Balaam was the acceptance of and compliance with false religion. It was an attempt to say, 'We do not have to denounce the religions of men in order to hold to the truth of God' (Numbers 25:1, 2; 31:16). The doctrine of the Nicolaitanes said, 'Faith in Christ does not require godliness and obedience to Christ.'

How does this apply to us today? If we embrace error regarding Christ's person, work, or doctrine, if we believe what our Lord did not teach or refuse to believe what He did teach, then we have denied His name and His faith.

Let us ever focus our hearts and minds on Christ our Lord, and shun everything that would turn our thoughts away from Him. Christ is the Way we must follow. That is practical Christianity. Christ is the Truth we must believe. That is doctrinal Christianity. Christ is the Life we must live. That is experimental Christianity. It matters not whether you talk about practical godliness, doctrinal truth, or experimental religion, all must be found in Christ, all must come from Christ, and all must direct us to Christ. We cannot be right in any area, unless Christ is the sum and substance of all. Our religion is Christ. Apart from this there is no true religion. Any doctrine divorced from Christ is heresy. Any precept divorced from Christ is legalism. Any religious experience divorced from Christ is fanaticism.

There are some who deny the faith by lives that are contrary to the gospel. Paul said to Timothy, 'If any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel' (1 Timothy 5:8). Morality will never produce faith; but faith always produces morality. This was the error of the Nicolaitanes. They held the truth in creed, but denied it in life. It matters not what I say I believe, if my manner of life is contrary to the gospel, I am an infidel, an unbeliever.

Others let go of Christ and deny the faith by actually forsaking Christ and the gospel (John 6:66; 1 John 2:19). There are some who deliberately choose to forsake the gospel, while others are gradually overcome by the deceitful charms of the world; but all who forsake Christ, all who forsake the gospel of the grace of God, have denied the faith. And by their actions they prove that their faith was false.

PERSEVERING FAITH

All true believers hold fast the name of Christ and will not deny the faith of the gospel. It is true that some, like Peter, fall at times and deny Christ for a season, but none of God's elect do so permanently and totally. In the tenor of their lives, God's people are faithful. All true believers will persevere in the faith to the end. This is clearly the teaching of Holy Scripture (Jeremiah 32:37-40; John 10:27-30).

How do we hold fast the name of Christ and the faith of the gospel? How is it that God's elect persevere in the faith? We must, in our hearts as well as in our heads, hold fast the faith of the gospel. The gospel is the message of God's free grace to sinners in Christ. It is the message of full atonement and free justification by the obedience of Christ as the sinner's Substitute. It is the message of salvation by grace alone without the works of man. It includes electing grace, redeeming grace, regenerating grace, and preserving grace. The grace of God in Christ is sovereign, free, irresistible, effectual, and saving. This is the faith of the gospel (Ephesians 1:3-14; 2 Timothy 1:9-12). Believing sinners hold it fast, knowing that we have no hope but the hope of free, sovereign grace in Christ.

We hold the faith by the full consent of our minds. God deals with the heart, but He does not bypass the mind. When Christ speaks our minds assent to what He says, and our hearts consent to His revelation. Our motto is, 'Let God be true, and every man a liar.'

Yet, there is more, we not only agree to the truth of the gospel, we have received the love of the truth. We hold the faith of the gospel in the affections of our hearts (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12). Many acknowledge the truth, but few love the truth. God's people love the truth. Divine sovereignty, electing love, effectual atonement, imputed righteousness, and almighty, infallible, irrevocable grace are matters of unceasing joy, thanksgiving, and consolation to needy sinners who have been made to experience them.

We hold the faith when we hold forth the faith of the gospel in the teeth of all opposition. Those who believe the gospel do not hide their colours. They raise the banner high. If men resist, we hold it higher still. If they oppose, we hold it high and wave it in their faces. If I believe the gospel, I am not ashamed to confess the gospel. Men may count me a fool. Men may ridicule me as a fanatic. Men may denounce me as an instigator of strife, but I am honoured to be counted a fool, ridiculed, and despised by men for Christ's sake.

If we would hold the faith of Christ, we must hold fast the name of Christ. We must, like those disciples to whom our Lord said, 'Will ye also go away?' reply, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God' (John 6:67-69).

Ever hold fast the deity of Christ's name. We rejoice to know that our Saviour is a man. But let us never forget that that man is 'the mighty God' (Isaiah 9:6). He is Immanuel, God with us, God in human flesh. When you put the finger of faith into the nail print in His hand, always cry with the heart of faith, 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28).

The royalty of Christ's name must never be forgotten (Romans 14:9; Philippians 2:9-11). Our Saviour is The Lord Jesus Christ. He reigns as King over all things and must continue to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords until He has put all of His enemies under His feet. Believing hearts bow in submission to Christ's kingly throne, trust His kingly power, submit to His kingly will, and obey His kingly rule.

Never was there a name of such greatness as Christ's name. 'His name is great in Israel' (Psalm 76:1). I will 'praise thy great and terrible name, for it is holy' (Psalm 99:3). 'There is none like unto thee, O LORD; thou art great, and thy name is great in might' (Jeremiah 10:6). 'I am a great King, saith the LORD of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen' (Malachi 1:14).

It is impossible to speak too highly, or even highly enough, of Christ's name. It is impossible to make too much, or even enough, of Him and His great name. His name is who He is. Surely, none can imagine that it is possible to make too much of Him who is all. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, and He is all and in all. The whole Bible was written

to set forth His name (Luke 24:27). The covenant of grace was ordered in His name. All the promises of God are yea and amen in His name. All the blessings of grace are received through His name. We are saved by faith in His name (Acts 4:12; Romans 10:13). We prevail in prayer through His name. God's servants are sent to preach His name. We find all comfort in His name.

Jesus, the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease,
'Tis music in the sinner's ears,
'Tis life, and health, and peace.

In the name of Christ, only in the name of Christ, we have a confident hope of victory (Romans 7:24-25; 8:35-39). Constantine once had a dream in which he imagined that God showed him the cross of Christ, and he took it as his emblem, with this motto, 'By the cross I conquer!' Believers care nothing for Constantine's superstitious idolizing of the sign of the cross. But we hold forth and hold fast the doctrine of the cross, the doctrine of the gospel and the name of Christ in it, and we say, 'By Christ we conquer!' If we persevere in the faith and hold fast the name of Christ firm unto the end we shall be saved (Matthew 10:22; Colossians 1:21-23; Hebrews 3:6, 14; 10:35-39). And all who are born of God shall persevere to the end, because God almighty who has 'begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.'

Hidden Manna, A White Stone, A New Name

This is our Saviour's promise: 'To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it' (v. 17). This is what that means: — If in the midst of much opposition from the world, the flesh, and the devil you hold fast my name and depart not from the faith of the gospel, you shall overcome your enemies and I will receive you into my heavenly kingdom.

The hidden manna which Christ will give us to eat forever is the very manna which we now eat by faith—It is Christ Himself (John 6:32-35). As today we live by feasting upon the merits of Christ's righteousness and shed blood (John 6:54), even so in heaven our souls shall live forever, feasting upon Him.

The white stone which Christ will give us is the stone of complete absolution in the day of judgement (Jeremiah 50:20). The allusion here is to the common practice of the Romans in judgement. After a man had been tried for a crime, if he was found guilty, the judges would cast a black stone into an urn, which meant condemnation. If he were found innocent, they would cast in a white stone, which signified that he had been acquitted and absolved of all guilt.

The new name which Christ will give us, which no man can know but those who receive it, is 'The Lord our Righteousness' (Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16). We have been made so perfectly righteous and holy by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us that our everlasting name shall be 'Jehovah our Righteousness' (Isaiah 56:5; 62:2).

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