

**Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb**  
*The Truth Must Matter*  
Revelation 2:12-17

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**Text:**

<sup>12</sup> “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. <sup>13</sup> “ ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup> Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> 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.’

**Introduction:**

There is a very prominent and very dangerous belief circulating amongst Christians today; and that belief is this: “I don’t really see the need to get bogged down in all that theological controversy; I just want to love Jesus and win people.” Now I admit that at one level that sounds very noble.

But this sentiment that we need not get bogged down in theological controversy but instead be about loving Jesus and winning people puts the church on the horns of a dilemma. If we break off the one horn and choose to be about theological controversy and doctrinal precision, it implies that we are not about the mission. How many times over the past 15 years have we heard the mantra that doctrine divides and kills a church? The other horn is no better. If you choose to be about the mission of winning people, it is assumed that you cannot pursue doctrinal precision. The way to solve the apparent “no-win-situation” is to split the horns of the dilemma by revealing the false presupposition that drives both sides. The false presupposition is simply this: that theological precision and pursuit of the mission are at odds with one another. That is simply false.

The question facing each church today seems to be simple: Do you want to be driven by doctrine or do you want to be driven by the mission? I ask you, church, should theology drive us or should the mission drive us?

Do you see? Even asking the questions in that way puts you on the horns of the dilemma. There are countless churches today driven by the mission. In fact, there is a wide-spread movement sweeping the land called the Emergent Church that has swallowed one of the horns. One of their distinctives is the driving desire to be missional. They so desire to be missional that they also hold as one of the distinctives doctrinal ambiguity. Just read the books put out by men like Rob Bell and Brian McLaren. They assume you cannot reach postmodern cultures with the absolutes of doctrine.

At the same time there are other churches that have swallowed the other horn. They want to be so doctrinally precise that they have little time to be missional. They gather in their holy-huddles and parse every word, dot every “I” and cross every “T” and separate from all those with whom they

disagree because they want to earnestly contend for the faith. Make no mistake there is a truth to contend for; but we need not be contentious.

I posed this question to a group that was here Wednesday evening: Should we be driven by theology or should we be driven by the mission. Immediately some said, “Theology” while others said “the mission.” My answer is that they are both wrong.

So this sentiment that says: “I don’t really see the need to get bogged down in all that theological controversy; I just want to love Jesus and win people,” implies several dangerous truths:

1. That love for Jesus and the winning of people can be distinct from a love for theological truth.
2. That theological truth need not be held with precision.
3. That there is no truth worth contending for.
4. That the mission of the church is distinct from the theology of the church

Now let me state these four truths in a positive way:

1. Love for Jesus and His people are fueled by a love for truth.
2. Theological truth must be held with precision.
3. All truth is worth contending for.
4. Theology drives our mission.

Should we be driven by theology or the mission? The answer is “Yes!” It’s both; but they must be held in the right order. The mission does not drive our theology; our theology drives our mission. If you say that you hold the truth of God with precision and earnestly contend for the faith but have little desire to be missional; you simply hold the truth in your head and not in your heart.

Let’s summarize these four truths in a sound bite: The truth must matter because people matter.

### **Two Churches in Contrast**

The church at Ephesus was a church, you recall, who got this half right. They were a disciplined church. If there was open sin in their church, they dealt with it. Ephesus was a discerning church. If there were men teaching and preaching doctrinal error, they dismissed them. Look back at 2:2. Jesus told them:

<sup>2</sup> “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.

You see, they could not bear with those who were evil; they disciplined them out. They tested the itinerate preachers to discern who was true and who was false. This church was doctrinally precise. There is a very interesting connection here with Pergamum. Look at v.6:

<sup>6</sup> Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

We are about to find that this hatred for the Nicolaitans was not the case for Pergamum. But for all of its glowing praise, you will also recall, that Jesus had something against the church at Ephesus. It is found in v.4:

<sup>4</sup> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

The church at Ephesus had forgotten how to love people. They had a tenacious grasp of truth and no grasp of people. They were a church where the truth mattered and people seemingly did not.

The exact antithesis to Ephesus is the church at Pergamum. Pergamum was a church where people mattered and the truth seemingly did not.

Now don't get me wrong! How do you suppose the eldership and membership at the First Church of Pergamum would have answered the question "Does the truth matter to you guys?" How would they have answered that question? I can almost guarantee you that they would have looked appalled at that question and declared, "Of course! The truth must matter!" And I believe that they believed that it did. But Jesus' words are very powerful.

### **What's in a name?**

Cities get known for certain things, don't they? They develop reputations. Soon, those reputation become reduced to nicknames. For example, "The windy city" describes Chicago; "Sin city" is the name for Las Vegas. Similarly, "Satan's city" could be the description for Pergamum. Pergamum was the place where Jesus says "Satan's throne" was. There are several options available to us as to why Jesus would say such a thing. In fact, David Aune lists eight possibilities in his commentary; but I think two of the option are probably the best.

The first option would be due to the fact that Pergamum was the city that housed the shrine to the Greek god, *Asclepios* (or Aesculapius). This was the most distinctive and celebrated cult of all the cults practiced in Pergamum. Asclepios was often referred to as the "Savior" (*soter*) in Greek mythology. He was believed to be the son of Apollo and was thought to have been the very first physician. He was the god of healing. You have seen the Greek symbol of Asclepios – the serpent on a pole – in such places as the American Cancer Society or the U.S. Department of Health. So given this allusion to a serpent, some believe that Satan's throne refers to the altar and the shrine erected for this cultic worship.

But perhaps the better option is simply that Pergamum was the city where cult worship was at the highest. There were no less that five major cults worshipped in this city. Upon entering the city one could not help but notice the gigantic altar of **Zeus** erected on a huge platform some 800 ft. above the city where looking down on the inhabitants lie a great vulture hovering over its prey. Amazingly, a reconstructed form of this altar is on display in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin!

But in addition to *Asclepios* and *Zeus* there were also altars erected for *Athene* and *Dionysus*. But perhaps more famous than them all was the temple erected as the first of all emperor worship. Pergamum was the home for the shrine to Augustus Caesar, the first of the reified Roman emperors. So it seems likely to me that when you take all of this into account for one city, this is the place where Satan's throne was. This city was in the clutches of Satan himself. This was Satan's city.

In spite of the fact that there was such a pagan influence in this community, this was a church that had a reputation for following Jesus. Notice Jesus' words in v. 13: "You hold fast to my name, and you did not deny my faith." In fact, even when the Roman torturers came to town, as we learned last week, and put one of their own men named Antipas to death, they did not cave-in. They held firm in their loyalty to Christ. This is commendable stuff, is it not!

Make no mistakes, folks. Pergamum was a true church loyal to Christ.

"But I have a few things against you," Jesus continues in v.14: "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. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent."

“The teaching of Balaam” was being held in a similar way by those who held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. In what way was the Nicolaitan doctrine similar to Balaam’s?

We read of Balaam in Numbers 22-24. Balak was the King of Moab who had solicited Balaam to curse the children of Israel as they were preparing to cross over into the Promised Land. Balak was afraid that the Jews were going to take over the land so he wanted to pronounce some kind of curse over them. Balaam, then, was known as some kind of a prophet who accepted the call to go and curse Israel because the money was good. God forbade Balaam from going the first time, but allowed him to go the second time instructing him to say only what God told him to say. Thus, God intervened. And every time Balaam opened his mouth (4 different occurrences) to pronounce a curse on Israel, he instead spoke words of blessing. Yet, As Balaam was moved by greed for the reward Balak offered him, Balaam advised Balak that Moabite women should seduce the men of Israel by inviting them to partake in their idolatrous feasts (which invariably led to sexual immorality).

What Balaam did was to suggest to Balak that he head for intermarriage and compromised religion. He knew that he could not curse them if God would not. Not only could he not speak but what God spoke; but even if he could curse them, his words were powerless unless God was behind them. So he suggests compromise. “Be friendly to them. Send your most lovely young virgins in among the Israelite men. Offer them opportunities to serve in your religion. Get involved with the Jews religion. You see, their God is a jealous God. If you get them all mixed up, you won’t have to worry about calling down a curse on them...”

Balaam knew that this would provoke the judgment of God against his people, which is precisely what happened. 24,000 people of the Israelites were killed by God.

Thus, Balaam was a prototype of those who promote compromise. What Balaam was to the children of Israel in the OT, the Nicolaitans were to the church of Jesus Christ in the NT – those who promote compromise, either doctrinally or ethically.

The church at Pergamum had some in its midst who were promoting some kind of compromise – less discipline, less doctrinal scrutiny – until Jesus himself is threatening the whole congregation. They were known as the Nicolaitans. And while we do not know with certainty who these people were or what they held to, we know that Christ hated their practices and the Pergamese Christians did not.

Is it enough to be known as a Jesus-loving church although you allow for those in your midst to compromise with evil doctrine and practices? For Jesus, it is unthinkable. Although they were a loyal church, they were a compromising church. He calls them to repent and to conquer. Otherwise, Jesus says he will come and war against them with the sword of his mouth (cf. v.16).

Now everything about this letter to the church of Pergamum from v. 13-16 is in the plural. That is, it is addressed to the congregation as a whole. Notice – it is not addressed to the elders but to the congregation – to the church. There is a stunning implication to all of this, namely, *that the church is responsible for holding its teachings and teachers accountable to biblical faithfulness.*

This is the way the entire NT treats the issue of truth. The congregation is the final authority on doctrinal preservation and orthodoxy. That is the way Paul addressed the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 10-13. He instructed them to weed out the false apostles. If they did not, he would do it when he came and it wouldn’t be pretty. Or listen to the way John writes in another place. (Read 2 John and note the connection between love for one another and doctrinal purity.) This letter is not written to the elder board or the congregation; it was written to an older lady within the church instructing her to not even invite false teachers into her home for dinner. Do you see?

So notice what John does at the close of this letter to Pergamum. Yes, although the letter is addressed to the congregation as a whole giving them license to police the doctrinal purity of its teachers, the

final burden rests squarely on the shoulders of each individual. How can the congregation as a whole police its teachers if the individuals who make up the whole are not feeling the burden to be doctrinally precise?

Look at how he individualizes all of this in v.17:

Revelation 2:17 (ESV)

<sup>17</sup> He [singular] who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one [singular, individual] 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.'

The conquering in this passage is to keep doing what you are doing right and to conquer this area of doctrinal laxity. Folks, you each need to be driven by a desire to doctrinal precision because you all corporately are the final authority that polices the church's teachers.