

4. Where The Devil Dwells

Revelation 2.12-17

Prayer

Introduction - Weakening the Word

When there is a conflict between what the Bible teaches and what the society around us believes, what ought to change, the Bible or our society? I think most of us would agree that society needs to change.

And if the conflict is between the Bible and our culture? What ought to give way? Of course, our culture needs to come under the authority of God's culture, laid out in his Word.

And between what the Bible says, and what our own hearts say? In that case, our hearts need to be brought into submission to the Word of God, and not the other way around.

The answers to these questions, I hope, would be fairly obvious to us. We are a church which claims to take the Bible very seriously.

Our Confession of Faith's first chapter is about the Bible, and it clearly articulates what we believe about the Bible:

"The authority of Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, depends not on the testimony of many men or Church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), who is its Author, and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God." (1.IV)

"The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; to which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." (1.VI)

"The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other than the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture." (1.X)

These are some of the key points of what we believe about the Bible. As a church, we claim to have a “high view” of Scripture, we claim to be conservative, reformed and evangelical, believing in the literal interpretation of all of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God.

But this doesn't mean we can let our guard down when it comes to maintaining that faith in the Word of God, as though we've arrived and our job is done. We are not immune.

Sometimes all it takes is the smallest seed of an idea to begin diluting God's authority as he has set it down in the Bible. And you may be surprised at the power of social pressure, cultural norms and hearts desires to erode even the most doctrinally sound foundation.

The Bishops' Report

There's been a good example this last Wednesday in the UK. At the moment, the Church of England is holding their General Synod. A hot topic for discussion, as it has been for a number of years now, is how the church ought to respond to those who identify as LGBT.

At the Synod, the House of Bishops presented a report on homosexuality and same sex marriage. The report maintained that marriage must remain between one man and one woman, and that churches should not hold services to bless same-sex unions. However, the report called for a culture of welcome and support for gay Christians.

The House of Bishops voted 43-1 in favour of the report. The House of Laity (elected representatives from churches) voted 106-83 in favour. However, the report was rejected when it didn't pass a vote in the House of Clergy (ordained church ministers), where they voted it down 100-93 with two abstentions.

Why? Why did the church ministers, those who teach the Word of God week in and week out in churches around England, vote to reject a report that merely upholds the common and traditional interpretation of the Bible on these issues?

Is it because better Biblical scholarship has been done which helps us to understand the Bible better? Is it because God appeared to someone and explained what he really meant when he forbade same-sex unions in the Bible?

Well, listen to this extract from a **BBC News article**:

“The Reverend Bertrand Olivier, who's gay, told the BBC the Church needed to reflect modern society.

He said: "I was ordained as an openly gay candidate then and it's been going backwards ever since at the same time as the nation has moved on and we now have legal same-sex marriage."¹

I raise this example not to run down those who struggle with same-sex attraction or who identify as LGBT. The topics that this same discussion attaches itself to are numerous. This one is just current, being headline news this last week..

My purpose is simply to highlight a principle that is commonly used to justify the revision of God's Word, and the rejection of it's authority.

In this example, Bible is seen to be out of step with "modern society". The solution that is called for then, is not for society to change to reflect God's Word, but that God's Word must change to reflect society.

(slide change)

Today's passage has some tricky ideas in it, so I think it would be helpful to tell you at the outset where we're heading. Hopefully this will help us to understand how these some of these strange ideas — strange to us anyway — fit into the letter to the church at Pergamum.

The letter to church at Pergamum is a sound rebuke from Jesus towards a church who are facing the dangerous consequences of trying to weaken the Word of God. Simply, they were taking the Bible, God's revelation of himself and his plan of salvation through Jesus Christ, and his law for faith and life, and where revising it, reinterpreting it and dumbing it down.

This is fatal for any church, which is why Jesus rebukes them in such strong terms, and calls them to repent.

Well, let's get into the letter to the church at Pergamum. We'll break it down the same we have all the letters so far, into six headings.

1. Commission

In v12 of chapter 2, we read John's commission from Jesus to write this letter:

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:”

(Revelation 2:12 ESV)

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-38982013> (Accessed: 16 Feb 2017 at 14:02)

Pergamum was the northernmost of the churches to which John was commissioned to write. While it lacked the economic importance of Ephesus and Smyrna, it was actually a more famous and significant city in the province of Asia.

Pergamum was the capital of the province, and had along history in the formation of the province following the subdivision of Alexander the Great's Empire.

So if Ephesus was Sydney, and Smyrna was Melbourne, Pergamum would be Canberra. I'm sure we'll find a parallel for Brisbane as we go through the rest of the letters!

This was the seat of government in the province. This also made it the centre of Roman religion in the region. In fact, it was the first city to erect a temple to a Roman ruler, in this case Caesar Augustus. There were also other temples and monuments for the worship of other Roman gods (such as the healer-god Asclepius, where the famous physician Galen trained), the old Greek gods of the region, and even Ancient Egyptian gods.

Pick your god, so long as it wasn't Jesus!

This concentration of idolatry may well be what Jesus means when he refers to Pergamum being a place where *"Satan's throne is"* and *"where Satan dwells"*, (v13). This was a place where worship that was due only to the Sovereign God was demanded by men who were in bondage to the Devil.

To be Christian in such a place certainly meant additional pressure to participate in pagan spirituality, the refusal of which constituted high treason and carried the death penalty, as a Christian named Antipas experienced.

2. The Characterisation (v12)

Here is v12, Jesus also identified himself in terms of the vision of chapter 1, and in a way that is particularly relevant for the church at Pergamum:

"The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword."

(Revelation 2:12 ESV)

In chapter 1, John saw Jesus:

"In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength."

(Revelation 1:16 ESV)

There are two interesting cross-references to this identification of Jesus. The first comes from the Old Testament, in **Isaiah 49**:

“Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.””

(Isaiah 49:1–3 ESV)

If nothing else, what we see here is glorious continuity of the whole Bible storyline, where the Jesus who appears to his church in Revelation is the identical Jesus to whom God speaks in Isaiah 49, as it was revealed to Isaiah.

The other cross-reference comes from much closer to the book of Revelation, in Hebrews 4:

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

(Hebrews 4:12 ESV)

This verse helps us to understand why the Word of God, especially in the mouth of his servant Jesus, is characterised as a sword - the Word of God is by nature offensive, incisive and authoritative.

We'll explore this more when we this image is repeated in v18.

3. The Commendation

As in most of the church, Jesus has some good things to say about the church in Pergamum.

“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.”

(Revelation 2:13 ESV)

This church, Jesus is well aware, is another good example of faith under fire. There were those in Pergamum who were willing to identify as followers of Jesus, and even remain loyal to the death.

This matters. There must be a genuine faith in a church where men and women are willing to give up their lives for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are no historical records about the Antipas, the faithful witness. However, if tradition might be believed, Antipas was appointed by John himself to be an overseer of the church in Pergamum sometime prior to being banished to Patmos.

It is said that Antipas was killed by worshippers of the Egyptian gods in Pergamum. He was forced inside a cast metal bull used to burn incense to the god Apis, under which a fire was set as he was roasted alive. According to some church tradition, this happened around A.D. 92, and that Antipas was the first martyr in Asia.

And for his troubles, the Roman Catholic Church goes and makes him a saint, and the guy you pray to if you have a toothache! Some of these guys really get a raw deal.

Two further comments on Antipas from stuff that's actually in the Bible. Firstly, I think we're meant to note the similarity between what John calls Jesus in 1:5 ("*Jesus Christ the faithful witness,*") and how Jesus refers here to Antipas. The grammar is technically bad, but identical in both places, which suggests something deliberate is going on.

Secondly, and perhaps explaining the first point, the actual Greek word for "witness" is the word from which we get "martyr" - someone who dies for their faith. Antipas, along with Stephen when he was stoned to death (as Paul recounts in Acts 22), are the only two people in the whole New Testament to be given this description, as clear examples of men who imitated Jesus Christ, the faithful martyr, who was faithful to God unto death.

So Jesus has high regard for the loyalty and faith of those at Pergamum, despite what must have been tremendous fear and pressure to conform. He's fully aware of how tough it is in Pergamum, where Satan has his throne, and he's pleased by the faithful endurance of the Christians there.

4. Condemnation

But all is not rosy in Pergamum. Jesus has something against them, as he does with most of the churches. In patient grace, he reveals it to them so that they may realise it's seriousness, and that something may be done about it.

"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. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans."

(Revelation 2:14–15 ESV)

You might remember the Nicolaitans from the letter to the church at Ephesus. I'll say again that we don't really have any idea what their angle was, only that it wasn't the Bible's angle.

To understand Jesus' reference to the *"teaching of Balaam"*, we need to go way back in the Old Testament.

We meet Balaam in Numbers 22, during the Israelite's exodus from slavery in Egypt. As they make their way towards the promised land, God gives them victory over other stronger and more powerful nations.

When the Israelites end up camping opposite the territory of Balak, King of Moab, he gets scared. So he engages the services of Balaam to curse the Israelites and protect his kingdom.

Unusually, Balaam consults the true God, who first refuses to let him go to serve Balak's wishes. He is asked again, and this time he goes, but has an interesting encounter with an angel along the way which causes his donkey to start talking!

Finally, he gets to Balak, and after consulting God again, instead of cursing, ends up blessing Israel three times, much to the embarrassment of Balak.

But Balaam does eventually become instrumental in Israel's unfaithfulness.

We read this in **Numbers 25**:

"While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel."

(Numbers 25:1–3 ESV)

Oops. How did that happen? Well, when Moses finally gets around to enacting the discipline God required for this sin, **we read**:

"Moses said to [the commanders], "Have you let all the women live? Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD."

(Numbers 31:15–16 ESV)

And we are told that Balaam himself is eventually “killed with the sword” by the army of Israel, when they overran Moab.

What did Balaam do? Well, he couldn't curse Israel, so it appears he tried to undermine them instead. As someone who claimed to speak from God, he dangled something attractive in front of young men living the desert, specifically beautiful, young, available Moabite women.

Perhaps his ‘advice’ included reinterpreting God’s clear command to

“Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. ... lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.”

(Exodus 34:12–16 ESV)

Whatever his advice was, it was clearly designed to weaken the Word of God, and cause the sons of Israel to sin grievously against the Lord.

So what was going on in Pergamum, and how does this reference to an Old Testament “diviner” help us understand it?

Well, it appears that just as Balaam enticed Israel to sin by offering advice that weakened God’s Word, there were those in the church at Pergamum who were doing just the same. Perhaps they realised, and had something to gain by it, like Balaam, or perhaps they didn’t.

In the face of tremendous pressure to conform by participating in idolatrous worship, and a licentious social scene that went with it, it appears some were weakening the word of God to allow for idolatry and immorality, as though God were ok with it.

“It’s ok to participate in worship to the Roman gods, as long you don’t really put your heart into what you’re doing. Then it’s not *really* idolatry. Besides, your business will suffer if you don’t, and then you won’t be able to give generously to the church.”

It’s ok to go to those parties where everyone's getting blind drunk and having sex on the tables. Hey, maybe you’ll even get to share the gospel with someone?”

What might this look like today?

“It’s ok, God is only displeased by sexual promiscuity and unfaithfulness. You can have a gay sexual relationship, as long as you’re married and have committed to each other under God.”

(Note: this is actually becoming a very common argument among evangelicals today, as they buckle to social pressure.)

“It’s ok to use porn, as long as you’re open and honest with your spouse, and it serves and builds up intimacy in your marriage.”

“It’s ok, God wants your marriage to succeed and flourish, that’s why it’s a good idea to live together first to see if you’re right for one-another.”

“It’s ok, you’re not really gossiping, you’re just ‘sharing’.”

“It’s ok, you don’t have to talk about sin when you tell something the gospel. That might put them off. Just tell them how much Jesus loves them.

“It’s ok. Remember, the Bible says we’re no longer under Law, we’re under grace.”

I’m sure you could think of other examples.

But friends, when we start doing this, when we start to weaken the Word of God on clear issues, we undermine God’s authority, we minimise sin, we cheapen the blood of Jesus, we quench the Holy Spirit, and perhaps worst of all, we lead our own brothers and sisters in Christ down a path to destruction - no matter how tolerable or comfortable that path may be.

I hope you can hear echoes of Satan’s temptation in the Garden in each of these examples. Weakening of the Word of God led to the very first sin, which led to the most tragic event in the history of our universe until the murder of the Son of God - the Fall.

Satan said, “““*Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden’?*””” (Genesis 3:1 ESV). And the rest, as they say, is history.

5. Command

In v15, Jesus in his grace gives a command to the church for their good, along with a very severe warning if they reject his command.

“Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.”

(Revelation 2:16 ESV)

The command is simple - repent. The church at Pergamum is to realise how serious their error is, to understand how much it hurts and displeases God. They are to learn to hate their sin of doctrinal compromise, turn from it, and by the strength God provides with his Holy Spirit, walk in his ways instead.

If not, Jesus said, he's getting that sword out.

We spoke earlier about the sword of Jesus' word, how it cuts through everything - especially false, unBiblical teaching

There is serious warning here to those who attempt to revise, or reinterpret or reject the Word of God, and still pass it off as the Word of God.

Jesus will not judge according to any alternative version of his Word. His standard for judgement always will be his own Word - the sword of his mouth.

When Jesus judges you, you cannot turn to him and say, "But Jesus, your Word says, we are not under law but under grace!" He will say, "You're reading it wrong - read the whole of Romans 6, because that's what I'm basing my judgement on."

Friends, we must stand firmly on the revealed Word of God, contained in the Bible. To stand on anything else, any other version of the truth, is foolish, because we won't be judged by any other standard.

6. Conquer

The final section contains the repeated exhortation to listen, but what follows appears to be utterly confusing.

"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."

(Revelation 2:17 ESV)

Hidden manna, white stones, and new, unknown names! What are we suppose to do with this?

Well, one thing we can be confident of is that these images made sense and meant something to the readers of John's letters. To them, these were encouraging words, that were designed to motivate them to look ahead to conquering with Jesus.

But as to what they mean, the simple truth is that we don't really know. Many Bible scholars have made many suggestions, and I've read many of them this week, still none the wiser as to who's got it right.

There was one suggestion that I'd like to share with you, though, because I think it's the best attempt to do justice to the text and the context that I've come across so far.

There's a lot that can be said here, so this is just an abridged version.

Let's start with the manna. Manna was what God provided from heaven to feed the Israelites in the desert, after they exited Egypt on their way to the Promised Land. It was a heavenly provision of food. And it satisfied the people for forty years.

Now, there's another reference to food in this letter - food sacrificed to idols, which is clearly the subject of rebuke.

And so the suggestion is that those who were seeking satisfaction in idols would do far better to seek satisfaction in God, through his heavenly provision. And the manna is 'hidden' for now, because it will only be revealed at the very end.

Now to the stone with the name on it. This is much harder to interpret, because we don't have any other specific reference to a white stone in the Bible.

In the culture of the day, white and black stones were sometimes used to cast votes in a trial - black for guilty, white for not guilty.

Sometimes, winners of the games were given a white stone called a *tessara*, which entitled them to access to public entertainment. Some have also referred to gem stones in the Old Testament High Priest's robes.

Any or all of these may be in view. But white is often a symbol of purity, and stone is often a symbol of permanence. We sometimes talk of things being "set in stone".

But that stone will also have something written on it - a new name that no-one knows except the one who receives it.

Names are very important in the book of Revelation. Have a look with me at Revelation 3:12, just over the page:

"The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name."

(Revelation 3:12 ESV)

In Revelation 19, John gets a further Revelation of Jesus himself. Notice the similarities with our letter today:

“His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.”

(Revelation 19:12–16 ESV)

And finally, when everything is done and the Heavenly Jerusalem is established, in Revelation 22:3

“No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”

(Revelation 22:3–4 ESV)

The point made by these references is that the name written on the stone is the name of Jesus - his heavenly name known only to those who conquer. It's a picture of an intimate relationship, of being marked with his special name.

The suggestion is then that, as the hidden manna paralleled the “food sacrificed to idols”, the white stone with a new name parallels the sexual immorality associated with Roman worship.

So those who were seeking intimacy in sexual immortality would do far better do patiently and hopefully wait for intimidation with Christ, which is better by far.

To summarise, then, what I think is a compelling interpretation: the one who conquers will not trade true satisfaction in God for false satisfaction in the world, and neither will they trade true intimacy with Jesus for false intimacy with the world.

Conclusion

Friends, at it's heart, this letter challenges us, as it did the church at Pergamum, to immerse ourselves in the Word of God, saturate our hearts and minds with it, study it, learn it, meditate on it, and with by the Spirit's activity within us to bring our whole selves into submission to it.

There may be things in Scripture which bear different perspectives. We've just had an example of that this morning. But as for those thing which are clear in the Bible, we must not compromise on them.

We must allow God to write his law upon our hearts and minds.

We must develop the discipline of seeking to discern what God is saying in his Word, rather than what would suit us best.

No matter what pressure comes at us from outside from society, or even from inside the church, and ever from well-meaning brothers and sisters, we must not bend on the revealed Word of God.

As I said earlier, weakening the Word by revising it, reinterpreting it or dumbing it down is fatal to a church - not so much because the church will wither and die, but because Jesus may war against it and kill it.

The English writer John Blanchard once wrote:

“Men do not reject the Bible because they find faults in it, but because it finds fault in them.”²

When the Bible finds faults in us, let us never be tempted to make excuses, or suggest that it's the Bible which needs changing. Remember ultimately what the purpose of God's revealed Word is — to show us that we are sinners in need of a saviour, and rebels in need of a rescue, and of course that Jesus Christ is that Saviour and that Rescuer.

And if that remains our compass, we won't stray from the path.

Let us pray.

² John Blanchard, ed., *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Accordance electronic ed. New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.