



Looking Inwards (15 mins) Caring For Each Other

*Reflecting on your life at the moment, is there anything you would like to share with other members of your home group which you feel is appropriate (this is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however: 'It's the sharing that enables the caring!') for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?



Looking Outwards (15 mins) Concern For Others

*Is there anything concerning someone in your: family; circle of friends; neighbours; or church, which you would like to share (please be careful not to pass on anything that is **confidential** or which you think the person/people concerned would not wish to be shared) for:*

Thanksgiving?

Prayer?

Encouragement?

Support in any way?

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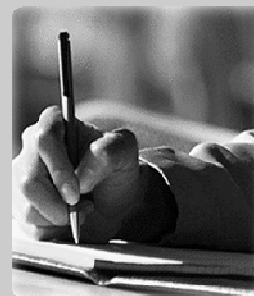


You've Got Mail: The Seven Churches In Asia HG82: Pergamum: Loyal Yet Compromised

Revelation 2:12-17

Home Group Study Notes

13th October 2013 - Revd Paul A. Carr



PLEASE COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN
ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION
BEFORE THE MEETING!

Don't forget to take your Bible to Home Group with you, along with any previous notes and other resources which might be helpful.



Welcome (10 mins) Ice Breaker

What kind of things makes you irritated, angry or frustrated?



Looking Upwards (10 mins) Worship

In your time of worship, you may want to sing Songs of Praise; listen to a Worship CD, as well as using Meditations; Bible Readings; Prayers ...



Looking Upwards (40 mins)

Bible Study

Read the text for this study, and any references given, then answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to listen to the sermon and/or read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss some, or all, your answers with your Home Group and, remember, these questions are only a guide to start your discussions.

1: ‘Christians today may imitate the weakness of the church at Pergamum in many ways.’ Which issues are most liable to affect your Christian life and the life of Emmanuel? How can we help each other to resist them?

2: In your experience, is the church (in general) too tough or too soft about applying discipline to its members? What guidelines for discipline are appropriate, and what pitfalls are to be avoided?

3: Have you encountered situations where truth has been compromised for unity? Do you agree with that transformation is an absolute must if Jesus is working in a person’s life?

Paul's warnings (Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5-6) set sexual immorality alongside such sins as idolatry, jealousy, greed and selfish ambition. There is the need for teaching and discipline in those areas too. Jesus challenges us to discover our own compromises and to allow him to transform our thinking and our actions, vs17: *Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.*

Truth and Transformation: For the Pergamum believers, faithfulness to truth in the face of error was a major issue. Truth matters. Sometimes, in enthusiasm for Christian unity, people suggest that doctrine and truth are not really important. People cry: “Love is everything, theology doesn't matter - its unity that counts.” The implication is that it doesn't matter what we believe, as long as we are together. And then, some argue to the other extreme, where truth or rigid conformity to their specific version of it is everything: “We can't have fellowship with any church that believes different doctrine from ours”. “They're compromisers”. But is it unity at any cost?

The heart of Christianity is transformation. It's about a God who isn't just concerned about our ‘spiritual lives’ but who wants to impact every aspect of our living. John Ortberg, in his excellent book: ‘The life you've always wanted’ suggests that: *Jesus' followers are those who intentionally arrange their lives around the goal of spiritual transformation.* Theological truth means nothing if it isn't followed by transformation. We could spend all our time talking about justification; sanctification and using jargonistic words that no-one understands. It's so much easier to show the truth of what Jesus can do for us through our lifestyle and our quality of life. That is the whole purpose of Bishop Stephen's Transforming Presence initiative. Can you remember what the four points are? **1) Inhabiting the world distinctively; 2) Evangelising effectively; 3) Serving with accountability; 4) Re-imagining ministry.** In the light of our study into the seven churches in Revelation, you begin to see how strategic these points are to the effectiveness of our Christian witness.

Promise: The final words of this letter are a promise that is especially fitting for Pergamum, vs17: *To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.* The white stone may have several connotations. Jurors used to give a stone to a man at the end of his trial - white indicating ‘not guilty’ black for ‘guilty.’ This would be a message of assurance that the church which remains faithful is held firm in God's love. And the new name? Because it is ‘known only to him who receives it’ it remains something of a mystery! People who are close to each other sometimes use private names, terms of endearment, which no one else knows. How many of us have nicknames for our spouse or children that only we know? We wouldn't want others to know would we? They are secret! And this new name *known only to him who receives it*, expresses the new and secure relationship between Jesus and the Christian. If I receive from Jesus' hand a white stone inscribed with a secret new name, I am known and loved so much by him that nothing can tear me from his grip.

Conclusion: The Pergamum church was something of a mixture. Their commitment to Jesus had already been severely tested, and one of them had paid with his life. Yet some had adopted an understanding of ‘Christian freedom’, which made them little different from the surrounding society. And the church as a whole, accepting this, had lost the cutting edge to its witness.

Perhaps, when we look at ourselves, this mixture is not so strange as it first appears. If faced with a clear-cut choice, whether to remain true to Jesus or renounce him to save our skin, we might find within us the strength to face martyrdom. However, when persecution is remote, we may all too easily conform to the prevailing assumptions and lifestyles of our society. We may then become, instead of guides pointing others to the right road, simply a well-disguised group of travellers, indistinguishable from the crowd. What is it to be?

Christians today may imitate the weakness of the church at Pergamum in many ways. When we:

- Are more concerned to be popular than faithful to Jesus' teachings;
- Expect to find glory without suffering;
- Accept without question the values, which dominate our society;
- Begin to believe that Jesus is only one of many ways to God;
- Surrender to the common assumption that, whilst God is important on a Sunday, He has little to do with our lives Monday to Saturday.

When we respond to Jesus' exposure of our compromises there is only one way forward, vs16: *Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.* The whole church was called to repent because it has been too tolerant of the Nicolaitans' compromise with emperor-worship, abuse of Christian freedom and a failure to discern the limits of authentic Christian behaviour.

But when should a church take a firm stand against attitudes and practices, which seem questionable to most of its members? When should it accept variant lifestyles as a proper expression of Christian diversity? Many churches, for example, accept that, within their membership, many may hold different convictions about war and pacifism, or the use of alcohol and drugs, or an interpretation of what is or isn't an appropriate sexual lifestyle. On what grounds is such a distinction made? These are difficult questions, and Christians often disagree about the answers – I know there are several different viewpoints on 'controversial' issues here at Emmanuel.

And why is that? Christians often disagree because they give differing weight to the authority of the Bible. Christians often disagree because of their interpretation of church history and church tradition. Christians often disagree on an issue of conscience. Some, who stress the importance of law in the Bible, will want rules to be laid down. Others will argue that the generous grace of God makes it inappropriate to lay down rules, which will create barriers between those who conform and those who do not. But every church needs some guidelines for deciding where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour lie.

The Spirit of the Age: The teaching of the Nicolaitans, as we observed a few weeks ago, was that they had succumbed to the spirit of the age and how much is the Anglican Church guilty of this? The issue of human sexuality and gay marriage is becoming a huge issue isn't it, with the ordaining of practising homosexuals as Bishops – especially in the USA. This is the principle at work in 1 Cor 5:1 where Paul confronts this immorality as: *a kind that does not occur even among pagans.* I try not to get upset over issues like this, as they can detract from our mission and ministry, as in Pergamum.

In recent years we've seen the vast majority of African and Asian churches disassociating themselves from the Episcopal Church of America - despite the financial implications this entails. Peter Akinola, former Archbishop of Nigeria said: *We aren't a church of anything goes. We believe in the scriptures, we believe there are boundaries. We believe there are do's and don'ts.* He went on to say that his church won't be held to ransom, or bought, on these issues.

Some people argue that God uses flawed people to do his work, and he does, however, this is not to be used as an excuse for ungodly lifestyles. Yes, God does use flawed people, but flawed people who have confessed their sins, repented of the past and allowed the Holy Spirit to bring change and who 'sin no more.' However, having said all that, I believe the church must get over its long-standing obsession with sexual sins, as though they were somehow more serious than others.

4: If our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), how can we show to others what is taking place in our heart? Suggest ways in which Christians can be seen to be different from the crowd?

5: What practices do you think Jesus would challenge the Church of England about if he wrote a letter to her today?

6: What issue has affected you most as you've read this study (and heard the sermon) that hasn't been included in the questions in this study?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



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Home Group Sermon Notes

13th October 2013 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Setting the Scene: Pergamum, with a population of around 120,000, is situated about 60 miles north of Smyrna and was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Whilst Pergamum is in ruins today, Bergama is the nearest town in modern Turkey. As with Smyrna, and Ephesus, gods of every kind had their temples in Pergamum: Athena, Hera and Zeus, who was known as the father of the gods. The god of healing, Asclepius, was also worshiped there and the temples served as the hospitals of the day. The symbol of this god, a serpent, was commonly found on coins in Pergamum and is still in prominent in the world of medicine today with the coiled snake on a staff. Pergamum had a library boasting 200,000 (handwritten) books, which was moved to Egypt by Anthony and given to Cleopatra as a love gift. Pergamum was also the place where the art of making parchment was first discovered which was called *pergamena*.

Greeting: As is typical of each of the other letters, the letter to the church in Pergamum opens with both the familiar address to the congregation and a specific word from Jesus which recalls a particular aspect of John's vision of the Risen Jesus in Revelation 1, which uniquely applies to this church: *"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword."* The image of a sword dominates the entire letter and is symbolic of Jesus coming in his kingly office for the purpose of bringing judgment upon his enemies. The sword symbolizes Jesus' judicial power - the power to judge all things according to the truth of God's word - and it warns the apostates within the church of Jesus' impending judgment upon them.

But the sword is also symbolic of something else. Roman governors were granted the "power of the sword" by the emperor in order to put to death those Christians who refused to acknowledge the divinity of Caesar. Jesus uses the same symbol to remind his church just who it is who wields the real sword of justice and power. The message is clear: all of those who persecute Jesus' people with the sword in this life will themselves face His judgment in the next. As the ancient proverb goes: *Those who live by the sword will die by the sword*. But this warning is also aimed at those individuals who seduce Jesus' people through false doctrine. They too will face his sword of judgment.

Address: In each of the other six letters Jesus says to the church: *I know your deeds*. To Pergamum he says, vs13:

I know where you live! As the Lord of his church, Jesus knows exactly what the Christians in Pergamum are facing. The city is dominated by paganism and emperor worship, vs13: *I know where you live, where Satan has his throne*. Although all of the Roman Empire was to worship the Caesars as a deity, not all of them had temples, many historians make Pergamum the place where a temple was first built for the worship of the Caesars.

Somewhere around 29 B.C. a temple was built in Pergamum to honour and worship Augustus. This is perhaps why the warning identifies this place as the church at Satan's seat, because there was the double presence of both the civil authority of Rome and also the presence of religious authority that rendered worship to Caesar. This made it a very difficult place for a Christian to profess that "Jesus Christ is Lord" and that his name is only one name whereby people may be saved. It's also interesting, is it not, that Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus. The true God come down to earth to overthrow the false god!

You remained true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me (vs13). Refusal to take part in worship of the emperor was interpreted as treason, punishable by death and the death of Antipas was yet another example of someone being killed for maintaining their faith. The Pergamum church is in sharp contrast to the church at Smyrna. Smyrna was enduring persecution; Pergamum was faced with enticement and corruption. It seems as though the devil has only two ways of approach. If he can't make us knuckle under with hostility and persecution he will begin to entice us and lure us into something dangerous. It's either the violence of a roaring lion or the corruption of an angel of light (1 Peter 5:8: *Be controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*. 2 Corinthians 11:14: *Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light*).

Challenge: Pergamum, whilst true to Jesus' name and not renouncing their faith was a church that was undermined by corrupt practices and teaching. The words of Jesus cut deep, vs14-15: *I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans*. These doctrinal errors are so serious that Jesus threatens to *"come to them soon and fight against them with the sword of his mouth."* For tolerating such heresy, Jesus commands the Pergamum church to repent, lest he come in judgment.

Where the church at Ephesus was guilty of a loveless resistance to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, the church at Pergamum is accused of allowing this group to prosper within its fellowship. There is a fine line, isn't there, between tolerance and intolerance, between loving correction of false teaching and an uncritical acceptance of new ideas! Between law and grace. Joining Prison Service at Durham – inmates who were friends. The letter to the Ephesian church commended careful testing to check whether a new teaching conforms to the truth revealed in Jesus (2:2), this letter highlights the need to test ourselves, to see whether we are alert to the dangers of being influenced by false teachings.

Nicolaitans: John explains the Nicolaitans' teaching further. After Balak king of Moab had tried without success to persuade Balaam to curse the Israelites during their journey from Egypt (Num.22-24) the Israelite men began to: marry Moabite women; eat their sacrificed animals; and worship their gods (Num. 25:1). Jewish tradition (and Numbers 31:16) explains that it was on Balaam's advice that Balak sent Moabite women to seduce the men of Israel to abandon their moral and religious purity. So Balaam is remembered as the originator of religious syncretism - that is, the compromising of one's own faith by mixing it with ideas and practices from other faiths. The Nicolaitans are leading God's people in the same direction. The 'apostolic decree' issued by the Council of Jerusalem AD 49 forbade sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:20).

Compromise: The church at Pergamum compromised with the surrounding society. In the same way that our temperaments, our experiences of life and our personal convictions will determine the points at which we refuse to renounce our faith and those at which we compromise our faith without really noticing.