

BEDWELL GLOBAL MINISTRIES

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"WHAT CHRIST'S THINKS OF THE CHURCH" PERGAMUM – THE CARELESS CHURCH

Scripture Reading – Revelation 2:1-17.

Introduction

The letters that were written to the seven churches bring into focus what Jesus considers as priority in His Church. What are the attributes He expects of us who claim to part of His Body? What are the spiritual values He considers to be paramount in the life of the church? We know what touches the church touches each of us because we are the church. We have already seen that so often what Jesus feels is vital to His church can differ radically from what we may consider to be of importance. We have learned that His assessment of the church at Ephesus was that they had lost their first love for Him. He told her she had fallen from great height and repentance was needed.

We then discovered that the Church at Smyrna had received high commendation from the Lord Jesus Christ. She was the church that remained faithful through intense suffering.

Now we turn the spotlight on the Church at Pergamum. The question with which we are dealing this morning is "What did Jesus think of His church at Pergamum?" Pergamum was a wealthy religious city. It was a city of temples where a number of different gods were honored and worshipped. It boasted of a medical center dedicated to Asklepios the savior god or the god of healing. It also boasted of a great library and it was devoted to emperor worship. Caesar was its god. In 29 B.C. permission had been granted to the citizens of Pergamum to erect and build a temple to Augustus. Because religious superstition was so prevalent, the spirit of the Anti-Christ was more evident in Pergamum than Christ. The pressure of persecution was put on the church by these evil forces. (Stott P.53.) There was also evidence that while the church remained faithful to Christ and the truth, she tolerated false teachers in her assembly. It was in this context that the Church in Pergamum was evaluated. So what did Jesus have to say to this church? Jesus first commented on,

1. THE CHURCH'S LOYALTY. Revelation 2:12-13.

"These are the words of Him who has a sharp, two-edged sword. I know where you live where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my Name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city –where Satan lives." These words of Jesus

are encouraging to his church. He knew where they were and what was happening to them, and above all He knew the extent of their commitment and loyalty to Him. Jesus points out the loyalty of the Church at Pergamum in two distinct ways. In what environment did the church live. Note,

a. The Sphere in which their Loyalty Operated. Revelation 2:13. Jesus said "I know where you live – where Satan has His throne....." I know where you live and I know where Satan lives. This is both a comforting and strengthening word here. To be told that God knows where his people are is to bring light in the darkness, give strength in weakness and impart power in the battle. "I know where you live he says. He is a God who keeps His finger on the situation. "I know where you live. I know where Satan has his throne." The word throne

means more than merely a seat. It has the idea of special authority. It is, for example in Matthew 19:28 the seat of a judge. And in Luke 1:32 it is the seat of a King. Pergamum therefore was more than just a place of Satan's residency. It was the place of his special authority. It was a city where the anti-God forces of the universe were exerting their destructive and most powerful influence. There is no doubt that Pergamum was the magnificent city of palaces, temples, library, medical center and religions. The citizens of Pergamum would proudly declare to the world what a noble city it was. But Jesus did not regard these achievements as of prime importance; He told the Christians that the throne of Satan was there. There are various ideas about what the throne of Satan was in Pergamum. Some identify it with the great altar of Zeus. Others make the connection with the worship of the god Asklepios that was prevalent in Pergamum. Asklepios was the god of healing. He was depicted as a snake. And people came from all over the world to be healed at his shrine. Non-poisonous snakes were allowed to roam freely in his temple. Those who sought healing would sleep or lie down on the floor of the temple, hoping to be touched by one of the snakes and thereby be healed. This place, some say, was the throne of Satan. Others pointed out Pergamum was the leading center of emperor worship in the province of Asia. The cult of emperor worship was strong and posed a grave threat to the Christians. John MacArthur tells us that it was their "refusal to worship Caesar and not the pagan gods that the Christians faced persecution. Satan's throne could be easily understood as reference to the might of Rome under "the god of this world, blaspheming the true God by the emperor worship cult." (Revelation P. 86.) Satan ruled with evil power in Pergamum and no doubt his throne was established in this city for any of these reasons. So Pergamum could justifiably be called the city where Satan's throne is. He wielded that authority with malignant power and vindictiveness against the people of God. Jesus knew and accepted the existence of Satan and warned the church about his evil power. The Bible refers to Satan as the "ruler of this dark world." Ephesian 6:12. "The ruler of the kingdom of the air....." He has both stupendous power and a

diabolical evil kingdom under his control. And ever ready to fulfill his purposes and expand his kingdom, are an array of malignantly wicked spirits which the scripture define as the "powers of this dark world and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Ephesians 6:12. The Christians at Pergamum lived where the darkness was. They lived in the heat of the battle. They suffered intense persecution and martyrdom and they did not renounce their faith even when one of them, Antipas was put to death because of His witness. They lived where Satan exercised his authority and wielded his power. They did not seek an easier place in which to live as the Children of God. They did not run from the darkness they shone in it. They remained faithful in the midst of the attack of powerful satanic forces, and their faithfulness did not pass unnoticed because Jesus pointed out that He knew the sphere of darkness in which their loyalty operated. Notice secondly.

b. The Scope (or extent) to which their loyalty extended. Revelation 2:13.

The words of Jesus speak to this truth. "You live where Satan has his throne." You live where Satan lives surrounded by a pernicious array of demonic powers. Yet you remain true to my Name. They recognized that these powers of evil were formidable and active. While undue attention should not be given to Satan and his demons in so much of the church today we seem reticent to talk about these evil forces. It sometimes leaves the impression that we minimize their influence and abilities to exercise power. Science and technology play down these powers. We hesitate to discuss their possibility in case we are considered at the worst to be fanatics or at the best eccentrics; furthermore it causes many to be embarrassed. The powers of evil are delighted by this attitude and are not intimidated by latest technology; indeed they use it to accomplish their black purposes. Hollywood does not seem to be embarrassed by all of this. The occult has got the attention of film directors and actors. They accept the reality of evil. They are playing a dangerous game. In his assessment of the situation in Pergamum, Jesus made clear and definite reference to Satan. He knew him to be a reality. His power must not be underestimated or played down. Christians

do this to their own spiritual peril. Jesus commended the church at Pergamum on her loyalty to His Name and the truth, in the midst of all that Satan was doing to destroy her. Peter Forsythe tells us that "to have no loyalty is to have no dignity and in the end no mankind. If you are ashamed to stand by your colors you had better seek another flag." Genuine loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ will proudly, resolutely and faithfully fly its flag in the dark and most difficult and dangerous places. The church at Pergamum remained true to the name of Christ in the midst of death. Jesus said "You remain true to my Name you did not renounce your faith in me....." The word Name here is not simply or label of identification. It is a disclosure of who Jesus is and what He has done for the world. That is why Peter speaking before the Sanhedrin said "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other Name under heaven given to man by whom we must be saved." Faith in name brings salvation to men. Enduring for that name ensures salvation at the end. Loyalty to that Name maintains salvation. Commitment to that Name gives courage. The Christians at Pergamum remained true to the Name of Christ in midst of danger and death. Such was the scope of their loyalty to Jesus. Jesus knew this to be true and commended them on it. "A young man in the army confided to the chaplain that he never went about with another girl if he was within fifty miles of home, his loyalty went fifty miles." Beyond that point loyalty to her disappeared. How far does your loyalty to Jesus go?" The church at Pergamum was loyal to the point of death. Jesus moves on complain about,

2. THE CHURCH'S LAXITY. Revelation 2:14-16.

Jesus said "Nevertheless 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. Repent therefore. Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."

What is striking about the church at Pergamum was that while the Christians themselves remained true to the name of Christ, and while they did not renounce their faith in Him, they were casual and lax in their attitude towards false prophets and erroneous teaching within the body of Christ." They themselves were loyal to the person of Christ and the doctrine of Christ, but they were careless in their stand against heresy in the church and Jesus had something to say about it. Jesus was concerned about the nonchalant approach and casual posture towards the infiltration of error into the church. Jesus condemned this attitude for he is seriously concerned about the preservation and proclamation of truth. One has said that the "guarding of truth of the gospel unsullied and unspoiled is a real concern of Jesus Christ." He is not only anxious that we should retain our first love for Him, and remain faithful in the hour of persecution, but also to have faith in Him and hold and defend the truth about Him. Deviation from the truth ultimately means spiritual and eternal disaster and degradation in the church. Two weeks ago we saw that Christ's concern about the church in Ephesus was love for Him as a first priority but at Pergamum it was truth. Truth is not incompatible with love. There must be a finely tuned balance between love for Christ and our fellowman and love for the truth. There is an approach in parts of the church that say let us lay aside truth in the interests of love. Some Christians are so resolved to make love paramount that they forget the sacredness and redemptive impact of revealed truth. This attitude can lead to compromising the truth in order to not offend anyone. This so called spirit of compassion is what Christianity is all about. But the purpose of love is not to please everyone but to be redemptive. Paul urged us to speak the truth in love. True Christian love does not does water down the truth to placate people. Christian love is redemptive and is truly concerned about what is best for soul. Others are equally mistaken in their pursuit of truth at the expense of love. So dogged is their zeal for God's Word that they become harsh, bitter, unloving and judgmental. Souls have been destroyed by the harsh enforcement of the truth. Churches have been divided not so much by the proclamation of truth but the loveless spirit in which it was done.

Love becomes sentimental if it is not strengthened by truth, and truth becomes harsh if it is not softened in its proclamation of love. John Stott wrote that "There needs to be preserved a balance of the Bible which tells us to hold the truth in love and to love one another in truth and grow not only in love but in discernment" True love will never compromise the truth. The kind of love which allows erroneous teaching is **NOT** condoned by the scriptures; it is in fact condemned by them. Reference is made by the Lord Jesus Christ to Balaam and the Nicolaitans. It is generally thought that they held to the same teaching. The teaching of these heresies challenged two fundamental areas as they relate to the church and the Christian. First it challenged,

a. Total Commitment to Christ. Revelation 2:14-15. The teaching of Balaam incited God's people to idolatry. Note in verse 14 Jesus says to the church "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 committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

It is generally thought that the teaching of the "Balaamites and the Nicolaitans were the same teachers and are not to be distinguished from each other. (Stott Jesus thinks P58) They challenge the allegiance of the church to a full commitment to God. What they were saying in effect was "don't tie yourself too close to Jesus." That would be too radical. Go and associate with a little idolatry. It was inherently a subtle seduction to do evil. Loose ties with Jesus might be tolerated, but this teaching of a total commitment to Christ was too much for them. Compromise a little, after all there are other gods beside Jesus, they would say. The truth is you cannot be a Christian and a Balaamite. Paul wrote that light cannot have fellowship with darkness. He urged the Christians at Corinth to come out of darkness. What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God." 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. It was Vance Havner who said, "You cannot sing, 'There is no way but the way of the cross,' if you are unwilling to sing, Then I bid farewell to the way of the world."

You cannot take up your stand "beneath the cross of Jesus" if you are not content to "let the world go by." You cannot properly "survey the wondrous cross" and not "sacrifice the things that charm you most" to His Blood. You cannot sing "My Jesus, I love thee" and mean it until "for Him all the follies or pleasures of sin you resign." You cannot from your heart sing "Whiter than snow" if you are unwilling for the Lord "to brake down every idol, cast out every foe." Balaam tried to make the best of two worlds. They "ran with the hare and hunted with the fox." The heart or the essence of Balaamism is worldliness. Christians and churches mixing in an unholy fellowship with this age by sharing its practices and allowing their ideologies to infiltrate the church are following the way of Balaam. They were teaching "When in Rome do as Rome does." Paul writing to Timothy says "Their teaching will spread like gangrene. 2 Timothy 2:17. This why Jesus condemned it. Once a teaching or a doctrine seduces men and women away from a total commitment to Christ and His truth it becomes evil in the sight of God. This false teaching strikes at the heart of a total commitment to the Sovereign Lord and the discipline of holy living." This teaching not only touched the a total commitment to Christ but also,

b. The Conduct Expected by Christ. Revelation 2:14-15. It was not only the teaching of these heresies that was erroneous but also their behavior. There is clear indication that **ANTINOMIANISM** had seeped into the church through their teaching. In other words they dared to suggest that the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free was in fact freedom to sin. Christ has redeemed us from the law they argued, we continue in sin that Grace may abound. That is not what Paul said in Romans 6:1-2. "What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning that Grace may increase? By no means! or God forbid! We died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?" They are godless men whose purpose was "as Paul points out in Jude verse 4 "to change the grace of God into license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." Because we are under grace does not mean to say that God has rescinded the requirements of the 10 commandments. Grace has brought these requirements into a new dimension.

The Bible says the Lord would write laws these into our hearts and mind and cause us to walk in them. Paul in Romans 8:3-4 writes "that God sent His Son to be a sin offering and so He condemned sin in sinful men, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us." **Grace does not free us to sin, it frees us from sin.** Havner comments that "the man who makes sinning his business has neither seen nor known God." (Repent or p.43) Paul writing to 2 Timothy 2:19 says, the Lord knows those who are His and "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord MUST turn away from wickedness." This is the Biblical standard of conduct for the Christian. That is why Jesus said "I hate the teachings of the Nicolaitians..." And He does because their teaching is the enemy of holiness and the foe of holy living." The church at Pergamum had been lax because they had tolerated false teaching in the church which gave birth to sinful conduct. Finally note,

3. THE CHURCH'S LIABILITY. Revelation 2:17. By this I mean the church's responsibility. The church is accountable to the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Head of Church. She is also accountable to the teaching of the Word of God and its truth by which she is guided, nourished and corrected. "He who has an ear to hear let Him hear what the Spirit is saying the church." There were people in the church at Pergamum who were trying to make the church broadminded. Today we call it making her progressive. We need to know that broadmindedness is not necessarily identical with truth and compatible with being relevant. It is dangerously unscriptural to believe that the church should become like the world system in order to win the world to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian or the church sins when she tolerates what God condemns. Jesus is condemning the church at Pergamum for allowing evil teaching and sinful behavior to reside in its precincts. What is the church's liability then? What is her responsibility? In what areas must she assume her responsibility? And what applies to the church applies to you and I. What Jesus says is that there must be

a. A Receptivity to the Message of the Spirit. Revelation 2:17. "He, who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This is the responsibility of

the Church. It is the responsibility to hear the message of the Holy Spirit and to obey His voice. What is important is to hear what HE has to say. Not what we would like Him to say. This does not mean a selective hearing or deciding what we want hear. In our day some come to church, in the words of Robert Bork, to “be soothed, to feel good, or have their itching ears scratched and the emotions titillated.” When Jesus says “He who has an ear to hear, let him hear **what the Spirit says**, must not primarily allow their receptiveness not be conditioned on what the substance of the message is. The question to be addressed is “who is the source of the message?” Is it the Holy Spirit who is speaking? Does the message originate in and from Him? In other words we must accept what the Holy Spirit says to us. What the Holy Spirit says is paramount - Pleasant or unpleasant - Palatable or unpalatable. There is to be an open-hearted response to all that the Spirit says to the church. He expects an honest sensitive response to His message, whether it means rebuke or re-enforcement. He, who has an ear to, let him hear **what the Spirit** says to the churches. These are the words of Him who has the sharp double-two edged sword.

The words in Revelation 1:16 confirm this truth, “In His right Hand He held seven stars and out of His mouth came a sharp double edged sword.” One has pointed out that this figure of speech may not be as strange as it appears at first sight, for the short Roman sword was tongue like in shape. The symbol of the Word of is a sword. The prophet Isaiah in a prophecy concerning Christ says of the Lord “He made my mouth like a sharp sword.” Isaiah 49:2. Paul made clear that Word of God is the “Sword of the Spirit.” The writer to the Hebrews is more detailed in his description of the penetrating work of the Word of God. “The Word of God,” he said, “is living and active, it penetrates even to the dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Hebrews 4:12-13. God’s word reaches where we are, in the inner man. God knows who are and the condition of the inward man. The Word of God comes to encourage, nourish our spirits and inspire our hearts, but it also comes to pierce, to convict of sin, to prick the conscience, to reveal selfishness and to expose our sinfulness in order

that we might be redeemed. This demands confession of our sin requires humility of spirit and calls us to repentance. This is not easy to accept, but is necessary to personal salvation. Jesus also makes clear at Pergamum that if there is no repentance He will come to them and fight those false teachers and their teaching. The weapon in that battle is the Word of God. "I will fight against them with the Sword of my mouth." The way to overcome false teaching and error is by the pure proclamation of the Word of God. John Stott is right when he writes that "falsehood will not be suppressed by the gruesome methods of the inquisition, or by burning of heretics at the stake, or by restrictive legislation, or even by war. The force of arms cannot conquer ideas. Only truth can defeat error. The false teaching of the world can be overthrown only by the superior Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ." (Stott. P. 63) "What Jesus thinks of His church is vital. The responsibility of the church is being receptive to the message of the Holy Spirit. "He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the church." The result will be,

b. A Resiliency As A Result of the Power of Christ. Revelation 2:17. By resiliency I mean that the Christian is an over comer. It refers to the child of God who is victorious. Now Jesus promises that He will give them two gifts. There are two symbols which are difficult to understand.

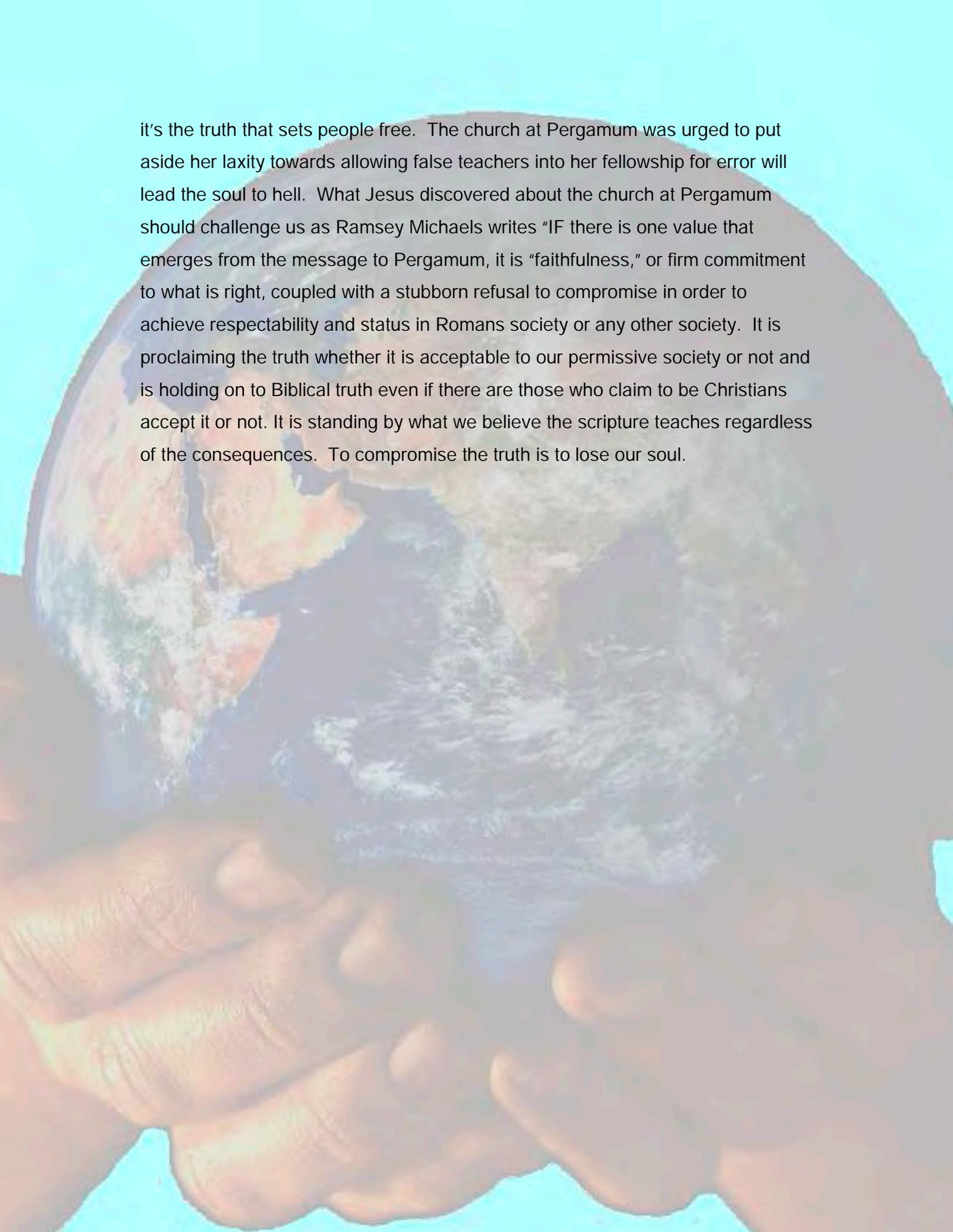
a. I will give you some of the hidden manna. Revelation 2:17 In verse 17 we read "To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna." We must remember that manna, a type of bread, fell from heaven and fed the Israelites as they journey from Egypt to Canaan. The hiddenness of the manna refers to the golden urn which held the manna, and which in turn was hidden in the Ark of the Covenant. The Manna here refers directly to the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Bread of life. Jesus refers to Himself as "The True Bread from heaven.....who gives His life for the world. John 6:31-35, and again He is the "living Bread which comes down from heaven." So that "if anyone eats of this Bread, he will live forever." **If we feed on Christ continually we will inherit eternal life. The second gift was,**

b. The gift of a white stone. Revelation 2:17. "I will give him a stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it." Again the white stone is a mystery. There are a number of interpretations of what the white stone is.

Archbishop Trench has a reasonable explanation for it. He brings to mind how the mysterious **"Urim and Thummim."** mentioned many times in the Old Testament, were consulted by the High Priest when he sought Divine guidance. They were connected with the twelve precious stones, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel which were set in the High Priests breastplate. The Urim, Trench thought, may have been a "white stone" or diamond on which was written, it has often been **conjectured, the secret name of God.** "Stott p.65, 66," Stott is convinced that "whatever the stone maybe, the new name to be engraved on it is undoubtedly the name of Christ who says later in the letter to the Church in Philadelphia. Revelation 3:12. "I will also write on him my new name." The meaning of the name will be revealed by the Lord Jesus Christ to the one He gives it to. One has said that this new name, which is the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, will serve as the believers admission pass into eternal life. The Bible makes clear that there is no other name by which man can be saved except the Name of Jesus.

Conclusion

The message of Jesus to the church at Pergamum is exceedingly relevant in our day. Error is infiltrating the western church at an alarming rate. I have been amazed how easily people are deceived by every new fad of doctrine. Indeed it is also abundantly clear that with so many of the present generation the truth of God's word in doctrine does not rate high in their choice of a church. There are so many issues that factor into deciding which church they will attend. Anything from the style of music, to superficial teaching and preaching and alluring programs, emotional hype and entertaining programs. Most of the time Biblical truth does not factor into the decision. But the true church will be concerned about not only proclaiming Biblical truth but holding on to it. The Church of Jesus Christ will give itself to guarding the holy faith as is found in the scriptures. For

A pair of hands, one from the left and one from the right, are shown holding a globe of the Earth. The hands are positioned as if supporting the globe from underneath. The globe shows the continents of North and South America. The background is a solid, light blue color. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

it's the truth that sets people free. The church at Pergamum was urged to put aside her laxity towards allowing false teachers into her fellowship for error will lead the soul to hell. What Jesus discovered about the church at Pergamum should challenge us as Ramsey Michaels writes "IF there is one value that emerges from the message to Pergamum, it is "faithfulness," or firm commitment to what is right, coupled with a stubborn refusal to compromise in order to achieve respectability and status in Romans society or any other society. It is proclaiming the truth whether it is acceptable to our permissive society or not and is holding on to Biblical truth even if there are those who claim to be Christians accept it or not. It is standing by what we believe the scripture teaches regardless of the consequences. To compromise the truth is to lose our soul.