

Three of the Most Offensive Christian Teachings ... and What We Can Do to Make them More Palatable Revelation 2:12-17

Few, if any, Christian teachings are more offensive to contemporary American culture than these three: (1) Jesus is the only way to heaven, (2) sex outside of marriage – whether heterosexual or homosexual – is sinful, and (3) those who do not believe in God and live for him come under his judgment. Because these affirmations are so offensive, churches and preachers may reject or sidestep them, in the effort to appeal to non-believers. This strategy is open to question, however: does it bring seekers to faith in Christ, or does it lead professing Christians to faith in culture?

The first-century Church faced similar opposition to these teachings. In response, some then advocated rejecting or sidestepping the doctrines, whether in the effort to win non-believers to faith, or in the effort to escape persecution. From Jesus' response to them in this passage, we can discern Jesus' response to such strategies today.

Day 1: Revelation 2:12-13 Where Satan lives and rules

Pergamum was a hostile place for Christians. Worship of Greco-Roman deities and of Roman emperors both featured prominently in civic life. It was the first city in Asia to construct a temple to the emperor, and served as a regional center for emperor worship. The city also boasted major temples to a variety of gods, including Athene, Demeter, Dionysus, and Asclepius, the god of healing (symbolized by a serpent, still in use as a logo by many medical associations today). Zeus also had a huge altar on the hill behind the city, where sacrifices were offered 24/7. For John, the plethora of temples marks Pergamum as 'the city where Satan lives,' and the emperor cult, as 'the city where Satan rules.' The point of this invective: behind the worship of these gods and the imperial persecution of Christians lurks the deception of Satan, archenemy of God and true faith.

We do well to note that this is private communication within the church, not a poster that John is printing for public distribution. Similar discretion between internal and external communication is appropriate today. At the same time, Scripture consistently rejects other faiths – even when sincerely pious and socially useful – as worship of those who are no gods, and as offense to the one true God. This truth is a fundamental, non-negotiable tenet of biblical faith.

Day 2: Revelation 2:12-13 What the Pergamum church does right

Given that Jesus will soon castigate this church, their achievement is remarkable: they hold fast to the name of Christ, and do not deny their faith, even after one of their members is martyred.

This underscores how high Jesus' expectations are for his followers. That a church could do so well – maintaining faith under threat of death – and still fall under criticism is a sobering reality. At the same time, he expects no more from us than what he did for us. Still, we do well to note that too often, the Christian message is reduced to 'salvation through faith alone'. The Reformers, following Jesus, added: 'but saving faith is never alone.' Here John, quoting Jesus, insists that faith must be accompanied by faithfulness (the one Greek word, *pistis*, encompassed both), even in the face of martyrdom. In fact, though the Gospel of John uses the verb 'to believe' almost 100 times, Revelation never once uses it, urging Christians not to 'believe', but instead to 'hold fast' and 'not deny' Christ. Much less do we today have any excuse for turning away from Jesus (or his teaching), simply because our culture or our friends oppose him (or it).

Day 3: Revelation 2:14 and Numbers 22-25 Balaam and Balak

Before going further, we take a step back to Israel's experience in the wilderness, in order to understand the reference here to Balaam and Balak. Some in Pergamum are promoting 'the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak [how] to trip up the sons of Israel'. Who was Balaam and how did he hurt Israel? The answer takes us back to Numbers 22-25.

Numbers 22-24 recounts an attempt by Balak, king of Moab, to gain an advantage over Israel, as the latter invaded Palestine. Given Israel's military victories thus far, Balak fears conquest. So he sends far away to a famous medium, offering a great deal of money, if Balaam will only come and curse the Israelites: "I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed" (Num 22:6). Balaam eventually agrees to come, but on condition that he will speak only what God tells him. In the end, Balak's strategy backfires: Balaam comes and blesses Israel.

The very next chapter, Numbers 25, is the salient one for present purposes. Though Balaam has already left for home, the proximity of the chapters, and the involvement of Moabites in both incidents, suggests that he left Balak with a parting strategy: if you cannot defeat Israel militarily because God fights for them, then lead them into sin so that God fights against them! Balak and the Moabites seize on this strategy: their women invite into their beds and to their feasts in honor of their gods. In judgment, God brings a plague against Israel, and 24,000 die.

John's point? God could not possibly make his stance clearer on either other religions or sexual immorality. He judged Israel for participating in these sins while in the wilderness. Jesus threatens judgment on those who do likewise in John's day. It follows that he will not tolerate either today.

Day 4: Revelation 2:14-15 What the Pergamum church does wrong

John gives no indication that the Christians in Pergamum had already succumbed to the temptation to participate either in emperor worship or in sexual immorality. Instead, his focus falls on those who promote the idea that both are permissible: "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." That is, his focus is on the false *teachers*, rather than on any actual engagement in the sin.

Still, the Church as a whole – and not just the false teachers – comes under criticism. The church is abdicating its corporate responsibility: it should rebuke those who hold to such beliefs, excommunicating them if necessary. This is not just to protect the church from corruption, but also to redeem the guilty from judgment. If the church does not, then Jesus will come and fight against the heretics.

Why would any believer endorse emperor worship or sexual immorality, in obvious contradiction to Scripture? John does not say, so we can only infer from historical and contemporary experience. As Jews and Christians looked at gentile culture, two features stood out: idol/emperor worship and sexual immorality. And to those Romans who knew them, two features of Judaism and Christianity stood out as bizarre: religious exclusivity and sexual inhibition. Those who abdicate on these issues would blend into the culture, and avoid both ostracism and persecution.

As we look around at our culture, idolatry is no longer an issue, but religious relativism certainly is, with its basic edict that all religions are alike, and no one can claim that their god is the only true God. And contemporary sexual mores easily compete with first-century standards. So we have similar incentive to equivocate on these two biblical absolutes. If we do equivocate, however, we should expect similar consequence.

Day 5: Revelation 2:12,16 The consequence

John employs two rhetorical devices to underscore the serious consequence for those who condone or participate in other religions or sexual immorality. The first device is 'inclusion' (or, 'bookends'); the

section (2:12-16) begins and ends on the same theme, the threat of judgment: “These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword (2:12)... Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth (2:16).” The second device is a pun: ‘*double-edged (distoma) sword*’ comes from the same root as ‘*sword of my mouth (stoma)*’ (2:16). The double-edged sword which threatens the false teachers in Pergamum is the sword (or ‘mouth’) of Jesus. Unless they repent and desist, the one who died to save them will instead kill them.

Why, then, must we maintain biblical teaching that there is only one true God, and that sexual immorality is wrong? Certainly we could make our lives easier, and better appeal to people around us, by dropping both tenets. But in so doing, we alienate Jesus. We become his enemy, and he who died to save us instead fights against us. The God who rescued Israel from Egypt turned against them when they participated in idol worship and sexual immorality, and 24,000 died. John cites this frightful incident to warn his own generation. He would equally cite it to warn ours.

Day 6: Revelation 2:17 A final word of reassurance

John – and Jesus – does not end on such a fierce note, but with a word of reassurance. The comfort is conditional: it is offered only to those who overcome this temptation and heresy. Still, those who are faithful receive two promises. The first: in place of the judgment which Israel endured in the wilderness, they will receive Israel’s wilderness blessing of manna; Jesus will bless and provide for them in their poverty. The second: alluding to a common first-century practice of protection through charms, Jesus offers protection; he will give them a stone with his own name on it, affording them protection in the midst of persecution.

A similar choice confronts each of us who profess Christ today. If under pressure from our culture, we devolve into religious relativism and affirm that all religions are alike, if we affirm that we believe in Christ but others have their own, equally valid and valuable gods, or if under pressure from our basic drives and with the encouragement of our sensuous culture, we devolve into sexual immorality, then we face execution at the hands of Jesus. If, however, we conquer these cultural seductions, then even if we face hostility from our culture, we have him, his blessing, and security.

The message to the church in Pergamum is that Jesus – like God in the wilderness – is not only savior, but also warrior. The only question for us – as for Israel in the wilderness – is whether he fights for us, or against us. The choice was theirs; now it is ours.