

# **Christ's Message to the Seven Churches**

## **Christ's Message to Pergamum**

*Revelation 2:12-17*

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## Scripture

We are currently in a series of messages titled, "Christ's Message to the Seven Churches," that is based on the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

In Revelation 1 the resurrected and glorified Christ revealed himself to his Apostle John, and told him to write letters to seven churches in Asia. Today, we shall examine the third of those letters, and learn about Christ's message to his church in Pergamum.

Let's read Christ's message to Pergamum in Revelation 2:12-17:

<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.' "

(Revelation 2:12-17)

## Introduction

During my tenure as pastor at Oakwood Presbyterian

Church in State College, PA, we had an influx of visitors to the church one fall. Worship attendance mushroomed about 30% in the space of a month. Then I learned that almost everyone was coming from an evangelical church in town, where the pastor had preached that Freemasonry was incompatible with Christianity. Soon these new attendees were asking my views on Freemasonry.

Well, our denomination had addressed the question in a 1988 study committee report on Freemasonry. Some of the conclusions of the study committee regarding Freemasonry were as follows: Their statements are incompatible with Christianity because they hold that Freemasonry is another religion. . . because their concept of God is degrading to the God of Scripture. . . because their concept of Jesus Christ is blasphemous.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the Freemasons did not like the conclusions of the report of the study committee. And there was tremendous pressure to be more loving and accepting of professing Christians who were Freemasons. I remember one lady pressing me to accept them because the Bible said that we were to be “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). She wanted me to be more loving, to be more tolerant, and accept the Freemasons. The problem, however, was that Freemasonry was not the truth; it was error. We did not agree that Freemasonry was compatible with Christianity, and soon all of the visitors stopped attending our worship services.

Christ's message to the church in Ephesus affirmed their commitment to the truth, but they were not loving. Christ's message to Pergamum also affirmed their commitment to the truth, but they had become tolerant of error.

## Lesson

The analysis of Christ's message to Pergamum as set forth in

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<sup>1</sup> See “The Report of the Ad-Interim Committee to Study Freemasonry” at <http://pcahistory.org/pca/2-300.pdf>.

## Christ's Message to the Seven Churches

Revelation 2:12-17 teaches us that a church may be orthodox but tolerant.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Address (2:12a)
2. The Description (2:12b)
3. The Commendation (2:13)
4. The Complaint (2:14-15)
5. The Command (2:16a)
6. The Warning (2:16b)
7. The Appeal (2:17a)
8. The Promise (2:17b-c)

### I. **The Address (2:12a)**

First, let's look at the address.

Christ said in verse 12a, **“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write. . . .”** The letter was addressed to **the angel**, which also means “messenger.” In context of the letters, I take it to mean that each letter was addressed to the pastor of the church.

Commentator George Beasley-Murray tells us the following about Pergamum:

For many years there was rivalry between Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum as to which was the first city of Asia. Of one thing there was no doubt: Pergamum was the center of the religious life of the province. The city was dominated by a huge hill that rose to 1000 feet above sea level and had many temples. The most famous was the temple of Asclepius, the god of healing, closely associated with the snake, which gave Pergamum a reputation like Lourdes today. There was also a huge altar of Zeus, built to commemorate a notable victory. Most important of all, Pergamum had the first temple in the area dedicated to Augustus and Rome, hence it became the center for the worship of the emperor in the province. As this was as much a political as a religious affiliation

it created peculiar problems for Christians. The titles of Lord, Savior and God were constantly applied to the emperor, which Christians could do no other than resist in the light of their sole rightful ascription to Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

## II. The Description (2:12b)

Second, notice the description.

Christ said in verse 12b, **“The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.”** This description comes from the description of the resurrected and glorified Christ that was given to the Apostle John in Revelation 1:16.

The **sharp two-edged sword** is the word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says, “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.” In Ephesians 6:17 the Apostle Paul described the word of God as a sword.

In the description in Revelation 1:16 I said that Christ protects his Church by means of his word, which is **the sharp two-edged sword**. Here in Revelation 2: 12b Christ says that he would protect his church by means of the word of God. Christ would use the word of God to protect the church against external threats. But Christ also spoke of judgments against enemies from within the church. John MacArthur said, “Those who attack Christ’s church, those who would sow lies, create discord, or otherwise harm his people, will be personally dealt with by the Lord of the church.”<sup>3</sup> And they will be dealt with by means of the word of God.

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<sup>2</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, “Revelation,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1429.

<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 48.

### III. The Commendation (2:13)

Third, observe the commendation.

The church in Pergamum lived and worshiped and witnessed in a city **“where Satan’s throne is”** (2:13a) and **“where Satan dwells”** (2:13d). They lived in a culture that was not simply diverse, it was thoroughly diabolical. “The implication is clear,” says John Stott, “namely that Satan was the source of the errors to which some church members had succumbed.”<sup>4</sup> We shall see more about the errors in just a moment.

But what does **“Satan’s throne”** mean? Well, commentators suggest that it could have referred to the magnificent altar of Zeus that sat on Pergamum’s acropolis. Or, it could have referred to the temple of Asclepius, the god of healing, to whom people came from all over the world for healing. Or, it could have referred to emperor worship that took place in Pergamum. Christians were pressured to worship the emperor and affirm him as “Lord,” “Savior,” and even “God.” Satan was extremely active in that culture pressuring Christians to acquiesce to the culture around them, and to fudge in their commitment to Christ.

That is so like our culture today, isn’t it? We live in a culture that constantly wants us to accommodate to it. Just eight years ago the President and one of the current presidential candidates opposed homosexual marriage. Today, it is the law of the land. And if Christians should speak in opposition to homosexual marriage, they are branded as homophobic hatemongers. The point is that Christians are being pressured to accommodate to our culture.

Christ went on to commend the church in Pergamum in verse 13b, **“Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith. . . .”** In the midst of a culture that was diabolically oppressive, Christians remained steadfastly committed to Christ. As

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<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 58.

John MacArthur said, “They did not deviate from fidelity to Christ or to the central truths of the Christian faith.”<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of withering opposition, they remained firm, **“even in the days of Antipas,”** said Christ, **“my faithful witness, who was killed among you”** (2:13c). We don’t know anything about **Antipas**, apart from this passage. He was a Christian in the church in Pergamum, and perhaps a leader in the church. He apparently refused to accommodate to the culture, and paid for his refusal with his life. John MacArthur says, “According to tradition, he was roasted to death inside a brass bull.”<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Christ commended **Antipas** by calling him **“my faithful witness.”** That was a title that was Christ used of himself (1:5; 3:14).

MacArthur also notes, “Antipas’s faithfulness and courage were a rebuke to those at Pergamum who were tempted to compromise with the world.”<sup>7</sup> What about us? If Christ were to examine us, as he does and will, will he say, **“Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith”**? Or will he find that we have accommodated to our culture?

#### IV. The Complaint (2:14-15)

Fourth, look at the complaint.

Christ said in verses 14-15, **“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.”** Christ’s complaint was that some in the church in Pergamum held to **the teaching of Balaam**, and they also held to **the teaching of the Nicolaitans**. Most Bible scholars believe that these errors were similar

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<sup>5</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 86.

<sup>6</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 87.

<sup>7</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 87.

and so constituted one error rather than two different errors.

The story of the Prophet **Balaam** is told in Numbers 22-24. He was summoned by **Balak**, the king of Moab, to come and curse the people of God who were about to cross over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. But every time **Balaam** opened his mouth, he was only able to bless the people of God rather than curse them. **Balak** offered **Balaam** a reward, and so, moved by greed (according to 2 Peter 2:15 and Jude 11), **Balaam** suggested another way for the downfall of the people of God. He suggested to **Balak** that Moabite girls should invite the men of God to take part in their idolatrous and immoral feasts, which would lead to their seduction. So **Balaam. . . 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.**

**The teaching of the Nicolaitans** was similar to **the teaching of Balaam**. John Stott said, “What Balaam was to the old Israel, the Nicolaitans evidently were to the new. They were insinuating their vile doctrines into the church. They were daring to suggest that the liberty with which Christ has made us free was a liberty to sin.”<sup>8</sup> The footnote in *The ESV Study Bible* says, “Likewise the **Nicolaitans**, though opposed in Ephesus, were spreading sexual and spiritual infidelity at Pergamum (see Rev. 2:6).”<sup>9</sup> So, **the false teaching of Balaam** and of **the Nicolaitans** was that the Christians could participate in Pergamum’s religious festivals, which included eating **food sacrificed to idols** and practicing **sexual immorality**.

## V. The Command (2:16a)

Fifth, notice the command.

Christ said in verse 16a, **“Therefore repent.”** The correct

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<sup>8</sup> John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 57.

<sup>9</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2466.



response to sin is always repentance. That is, Christ wanted the church in Pergamum to recognize that they had tolerated error in their midst. They had not disciplined those who taught the error, and so they were to turn from their tolerant ways, discipline the error, and teach correct doctrine.

## VI. The Warning (2:16b)

Sixth, observe the warning.

Christ said in verse 16b, **“If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.”** John MacArthur said,

The entire church faced the battle sword of Christ's judgment, the heretics for practicing their heresy and iniquity, and the rest of the church for tolerating it. . . .

The church cannot tolerate evil in any form. . . . Sinning believers should be made to feel miserable in the fellowship and worship of the church by being confronted powerfully with the Word of God. Neither is the goal of the church to provide an environment where unbelievers feel comfortable; it is to be a place where they can hear the truth and be convicted of their sins so as to be saved (Rom. 10:13–17). Gently (cf. 2 Tim. 2:24–26), lovingly, graciously, yet firmly, unbelievers need to be confronted with the reality of their sin and God's gracious provision through the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Error will never be suppressed by compromising with it. Today's nonconfrontive church is largely repeating the error of the Pergamum church on a grand scale, and faces the judgment of the Lord of the church.<sup>10</sup>

## VII. The Appeal (2:17a)

Seventh, look at the appeal.

Christ said in verse 17a, **“He who has an ear, let him hear**

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<sup>10</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 89–90.

**what the Spirit says to the churches.”** Christ appealed to believers to pay attention to what he said to them through the Spirit.

### VIII. The Promise (2:17b-c)

And eighth, notice the promise.

Christ promised two things to faithful Christians.

*First, Christ promised hidden manna.* Christ said in verse 17b, **“To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna.”** God fed his people during their wandering the wilderness with **manna** (Exodus 16:14ff). According to Exodus 16:33, the people of God were to keep a jar of **manna** inside the Ark of the Covenant. In this passage, the **hidden manna** represents Jesus Christ. He provides spiritual food to all who put their faith in him. As John MacArthur said, “The **hidden manna** symbolizes all the blessings and benefits of knowing Christ (Eph. 1:3).”<sup>11</sup>

*And second, Christ promised a white stone.* Christ said in verse 17c, **“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.”** Commentators differ on the meaning of the **white stone**. However, I think *The ESV Study Bible* is correct when it says, “Historically, a white stone was given to victors at games for entrance to banquets.”<sup>12</sup> The athlete had his name inscribed on the **white stone**, and it serve as his ticket to a special banquet for those receiving an award. Thus, Christ promises the one who conquers, that is, who trusts in Jesus, entrance into the eternal banquet.

### Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Christ’s message to Pergamum as set forth in Revelation 2:12-17, we should commit ourselves to

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<sup>11</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible*, 2466.

obey the truth of God's word.

We should never tolerate error in our personal lives or in our church. We should seek to be loving, yes, but we should also seek to obey the truth of God's word in every area of our lives.

This past week I attended a Pastor's lunch. The speaker was Bob Lepine. He closed his message with a story about Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, NY. For many years Tim Keller invited people to stay after the Worship Service and ask him questions, particularly about the sermon. The church had grown rapidly under Tim's preaching, and his gospel presentation was making a large impact upon the residents of New York. Many of them had never heard the gospel, and Tim's proclamation of the good news was impacting scores of people.

One Sunday a group of people gathered after the Worship Service. One lady said, "I have been coming to Redeemer for about four Sundays. I love what I am hearing, and I want to become a member here. But I have a question. Do I need to give up my lesbian relationship in order to become a member?"

All eyes in the group turned and looked at the lady. Then, all eyes in the group turned and look at Tim Keller.

How would he answer this question?

Tim answered her as follows, "Actually, I think you are asking the wrong question. The question you need to ask is this: Is Jesus Christ who he claims to be? You see, if Jesus is God, and if he is the Savior of sinners, then when I surrender my life to him, I don't come and bargain with him. I surrender everything in my life to his Lordship, and I do what he says."

Friends, Christ is God. He is Lord. And he sovereignly walks among his people. And his people obey him in everything he says. They are not tolerant of any error but commit to obey the truth of God's word in every area of their lives.

May God help us to be such a church. Amen.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp)
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/source\\_detail.asp?sourceid=FreddyFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=FreddyFritz)

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## **PRAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for Christ's message to the church in Pergamum.

The church in Smyrna was a church that was committed to truth. And yet, it was also a tolerant church that allowed error to creep in to the congregation that was not disciplined.

O God, help us as individuals and as a church not to be tolerant of any error but to commit to obeying the truth of your word in every area of our lives.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## **BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

## **CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!