

Why Churches Fail: Pergamon

“No adultery is bloodless.” (Natalia Ginzburg)

Natalia Ginzburg's graphic statement contradicts the popular opinion that adultery is a victimless behavior.

But adultery and other kinds of sexual immorality result in significant damage to the lives of those who indulge their wanton behavior. Here's few of them:

- Guilt;
- Emotional disturbances;
- Sexually transmitted diseases; and
- Loss of family and friends.

Other damages lurk hidden in the mind and heart and inflict their consequences long after the end of their affairs. A life of sexual immorality produces a castaway life. Natalia Ginzburg spoke truly: “No adultery (or sexual immorality) is bloodless.”

Sexual sin produces its greatest harm when pursued by professing Christians. The profession of faith in Christ, even a sincere one, does not make one immune to the insidious nature of sexual immorality.

The Bible frequently condemns it. In fact, Christ wrote a letter to Christians in Pergamos, a city in southwest Asia (now Turkey) on these very evils.

According to *Fausset Bible Dictionary*, Pergamos was founded during 197-159 BC. It became a headquarters for demonic activity and home to 6 different idol temples. Christ mentioned this characteristic in His letter to them, calling the city the “seat of satan” and the “place where satan dwells.”

We do not know about the formation of the Christian assembly in Pergamos. But in Acts 18-19, it tells that while Paul, Priscilla, and Aquilla ministered in Ephesus, a city south of Pergamos, they and other believers spread the gospel throughout all of Asia. No doubt they began a Christian congregation in Pergamos during these efforts.

Christ's Letter To Believers In Pergamos

Christ wrote a letter through the Apostle John to the believers in Pergamos. You can find it in Revelation 2.12-17. It expressed Christ's love and concern for them.

Revelation of Christ

At the start of the letter, Jesus gave a revelation of Himself in Revelation 2.12:

“These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges...”

This description of Christ comes from Revelation 1.16 which depicts this sword coming out of His mouth. Revelation includes vivid pictures to describe messages, persons, and events. The “two-edged sword coming out of His mouth” reminded the Pergamos believers of God's word as described in Hebrews 4.12 as “sharper than a two-edged sword.”

It also depicts a piece of spiritual armor that God provides to His children to assist them in their defense against satan: “the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.” (Ephesians 6.17)

Christ wanted His followers to know that He would subdue their enemy, satan, and bring judgment to disobedient believers with the word of His mouth

Christ revealed additional aspects of His nature in Revelation 2.13:

"I know thy works..."

In this short statement, Jesus revealed His deity, for only God knows all things. Further, it showed His sovereignty over all things, His omnipresence, and His omniscience. Christ reminded His followers that He was indeed present in them as individual believers as well as among them as they met together. His knowledge even included mindfulness of the thoughts and intents of their hearts, as well as their actions.

Recognition of believers

When He told them in Revelation 2.13, *"I know..."*, He then explained what He knew about them. He praised their works. These Pergamos believers actively followed Christ and performed good works among themselves and their city.

In addition, Jesus lauded their faithfulness to His name. They held fast to the name of Christ. Also, one of their fellow believers, Antipas, became a faithful martyr for the name of Christ. Even when Antipas died, the other followers of Christ remained faithful even in the midst of evil persecution.

The evil persecution that they experienced developed because of the demonic presence in Pergamos. Jesus described Pergamos as "satan's seat" and the "place where satan dwelleth."

Yet, they remained faithful to Christ's name in the midst of terrible satanic oppression.

Rebuke of believers

Even though Christ praised them for their works and faithfulness, He also rebuked them in Revelation 2.14-15 for their sinful practices.

Dr. Charles Ryrie in his Study Bible describes their evil behavior under two false doctrines. The Doctrine of Balaam refers back to Israel's history of their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. On that trip, they encountered the land of the Moabites ruled by King Balak.

As they moved along, Moses asked King Balak for safe passage through their land on their journey. King Balak refused Moses' request. In addition, he sent an emissary to Balaam, a well-known false prophet. King Balak enticed Balaam, a false prophet, with substantial money to come and curse the Israelites.

Balaam, not one to refuse large funds for his religious abilities and covetousness, came at Balak's request. But God spoke to Balaam and commanded him not to curse Israel.

Now in a bind, Balaam definitely wanted the money, but could not fulfill Balak's request to curse Israel. So, Balaam devised a deceit for King Balak and his nation to perpetrate upon Israel.

Balaam encouraged the king to entice the Israelites to attend Moab's idolatrous feasts. Israel consented and fell victim to Moab's idolatry, immorality which attended their feasts, and intermarriage with them.

These events became known as the Doctrine of Balaam. This Christian congregation in Pergamos included those who followed this evil practice. They repeated the same evils that the Israelites did by indulging in idolatrous feasts and sexual immorality.

Dr. Ryrie further explains another error of the Pergamos believers, the Doctrine of the

Nicolaitans. This fallacy shared a common feature of the Doctrine of Balaam, sexual immorality.

The Nicolaitans preached that “free love” (meaning free sex) brought true freedom. No one could attain true freedom without abandonment to sexual license and behavior. Some of the Christian congregation at Pergamos followed the error of the Nicolaitans, which Christ said He hated.

Jesus used the word “fornication” to identify their sexual immorality. It comes from the Greek word “Pornea”. This root word encompasses every type of sexual immorality: prostitution, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, incest, and bestiality. Christ allowed no aberration in sexual relationships. He reserved it for a man and a woman in marriage to each other.

Though the believers in Pergamos possessed some fine qualities, they also condoned great sexual immorality among them.

Repentance for sin

Because of their sin, Christ demanded in Revelation 2.16 that the Pergamos Christian congregation repent of their sinful behavior. The repentance that Christ required exceeded mere sorrow and regret for their sin.

According to Louw-Nida, noted Biblical scholars, Christ commanded a complete change in behavior from their sin which would come from a total reversal of thought and attitude toward their sin and toward righteousness.

His command included an “or else” clause. If they did not repent, turning from their sin to righteousness, Christ would come with judgment:

“Repent, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”

Notice that Jesus demanded prompt change, no waiting period. He would come and overcome those who followed the false doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, if they refused to repent.

Reward for believers

To those who overcame their sinful behavior and faithfulness to the name of Christ, He promised a reward to them in Revelation 2.17:

“To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written...”

Jesus promised great rewards that He would give to those who, in faithfulness to Him, experienced victory over satan, the Doctrine of Balaam, and the Doctrine of the Nicolaitans. He also demanded repentance from their sexual immorality.

The “hidden manna” refers back again to Israel’s journey to the Promised Land. God fed them with manna from heaven. During His earthly ministry, Jesus said that He was the bread of heaven, the true manna. (John 6.30-35) He promised the obedient that they would enjoy Him in intimate fellowship as the Bride of Christ at His marriage supper because of their faith in Him.

Dr. Linski, noted Bible scholar, describes the “white stone” as depicting purity of

character, confirming the promise of Scripture that when believers see Christ in glory, they will be like Him because they will see Him as He is. (1 John 3.2-3)

Further, the "new name on the white stone" confirms Isaiah 65.15 which promises a new name to Christ's followers, the servants of God.

To those who overcame, He promised them intimate fellowship with Him at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, purity of character, and a new name for His servants.

Purpose of Christ's Letter To Pergamos

Why did Christ send this letter to the believers at Pergamos? Christ never does anything without a purpose. This letter is not different. Christ wrote to them with a specific message for them:

1. Revelation of Himself and His nature: His powerful word, His deity, His sovereignty, His omnipresence, and His omniscience which confirmed Him and His attributes to them;
2. Recognition of their praiseworthy acts to commend them;
3. Rebuke for their sexual immorality to convict and correct them;
4. Repentance for their sin to conform them to His image; and
5. Reward for obedience to comfort them.

Christ intended His message to enlighten them, to encourage them in trying times, to correct them, to strengthen their faith, to conform them to Christ, and to confirm their minds as to the promises made to them as children of God.

Correlation To You And Me

Perhaps by now you have this question: How does that correlate to me? This letter to the believers in Pergamos contains significant relevance to you and me. All that was true then is true now. Christians and Christian communities today experience similarities to Pergamos.

Although we exhibit many favorable traits, a vile evil invades the Body of Christ. Sexual immorality of all types and description proliferates among us.

I did an internet search for "sexual immorality among Christians." The result shocked me. My search revealed over 17,000,000 pages of data. These evils flourish among us because individuals and leaders, including pastors, refuse to call for conviction and repentance from sexual immorality in all its forms.

Furthermore, we, too, experience the presence and activity of satan in our cultures and Christian congregations. Thousands of fellow believers suffer persecution for their faith in Christ.

Therefore, the purposes of God's warning in writing His letter to the believers in Pergamos apply to us today, too:

- Revelation of Christ to confirm His nature;
- Recognition of godly character to commend us;
- Rebuke for sin to convict us for sin;
- Repentance to correct us from sin and to conform us to the image of Christ; and
- Reward to those faithful to the name of Christ to comfort us with His promises.

Why do Christians and Christian congregations fail today? Like the congregation at Pergamos, Christians and Christian assemblies fail because of the presence of sexual sin in the lives of individual believers and within Christian congregations.

Implications For You And Me

What implications do these truths for Pergamos produce upon our lives today? Since we emulate this first century congregation, therefore, we have the same implications upon us as those believers in Pergamos.

Believers

Suppose you profess faith in Christ. Do you resist the temptations of sexual immorality? I hope you do. I pray that God will enable you to flee these lusts.

Or, do you indulge in sexual immorality? Do you belong to a congregation that condones it among its members? The pages of the internet today reveal a pervasive presence and toleration of these evils in Christian leadership and congregations.

The sin of sexual immorality is not a bloodless practice. It affects the lives of those who indulge in it, including Christian congregations that wink at it.

The warning that Christ gave to Pergamos fits our day, too. We must insist upon repentance from these great evils, not a coverup. Professing believers at all levels in the Body of Christ who commit these evils must repent, Further, Christian leaders must demand repentance for sexual immoralities from those whom they lead: a complete change of attitude and behavior regarding sin and God's demand for holiness, which will result in a turn from sexual immorality to righteous behavior in thought and attitude.

We must resist the insidious temptations for sexual sin. Refuse to follow the example of King David who yielded to lust and committed adultery with Bathsheba and later killed her husband. He experienced life-long damages in his life because of his sin.

Instead, as Joseph in Egypt, we must flee the temptations of sexual immorality, not giving them a resting place in mind or heart, as we live in our sex saturated societies.

Unbelievers

Perhaps, you have never trusted Christ. In fact, truth be told, you have never expressed an interest in God or His Son, Jesus Christ. Your enmity against God and Christ come naturally to you.

As a descendant of Adam and Eve, you inherited their sinful natures. You were born in sin. Your sinful nature separates you from God as their sin separated them from God in the Garden in Eden and places you under God's condemnation.

Your life of sinful rebellion against God may even include sexual immorality. Up to this point you have no conviction of your sin to turn from your evil lifestyle, including sexual immorality. You have no interest in God.

In fact, you have no power to overcome sin in your life. Nor can you reconcile yourself back to God, overcoming the chasm between you and defeating God's just condemnation of you for your sin against Him.

Your condition reveals your need of divine life to forgive your sin and to bring you to God and transform your life.

Hear God's word to you today. God made provision for sinners like you and me to redeem sinners from sin and to reconcile them to Himself.

He gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, Who came into this world through His virgin birth from His mother, Mary, to become a substitute for people like you and me. He lived a sinless life in this wicked world, resisting all of satan's and the world's temptations to sin, including sexual immorality. Yet, He completely obeyed God in every area of His life.

The life that He lived qualified Him for the death that He died. He died on the cross not for His sins, but as a substitute for sinners. On the cross, He paid the penalty that the sins of people like you and me deserve. In the plan and purpose of God, Christ became a substitute and savior of sinners.

Then, three days and three nights after His death, Christ arose from the grave victorious over sin and death. In His death and resurrection, Jesus paid the penalty for sinners like you and me. Further, He destroyed all the works of satan and all his sinful effects.

In other words, the death that Jesus died qualifies sinners like you and me who trust Him to live the life that He lived. Those who come to God through Christ experience the life of Christ dwelling and active within them. God reconciles them to Himself and adopts them as His children.

God accepted the payment of Christ on the cross as payment in full for everyone who comes to Him through faith in Christ as Savior. Further, God promised to accept everyone who comes to Him through faith in Christ.

The indwelling presence of God enables His children to live the life that He demands. He enables believers to turn from their sinful, selfish, self-satisfying lives of rebellion against God to trust Christ as their Substitute and Savior from sin.

Projection

Whether you currently believe in Christ or have not to this point trusted in Him, you have a choice to make. You can reject the offers that God provides to you and continue your life as you now live.

If you continue to live in sin, you will never experience the quality of life that God gives to those who trust Him. Further, you reject the warnings from Christ against your sin and place yourself open to God's judgment upon you.

Or you can accept these offers to repent from your sin and trust Christ. Then, you will begin to enjoy His life within you to its fullest...joy, freedom from guilt, and peace of mind and heart.

Prayer

If you are child of God and blinded by sexual lust, I pray that the Holy Spirit will convict you of your sin and bring you to repentance, enabling you to resist and flee sexual immorality.

If you have never trusted Christ, I pray that the Holy Spirit will give you Christ's new life from above. I pray that the Holy Spirit will come to you today, convict of your sin and need of His divine work in your life. I pray that the Holy Spirit will give you the faith to trust Christ as your Substitute Savior and to obey His commands. God will forgive you, cleanse you from sin, reconcile you to Himself, adopt you as His child, and indwell you. He will give you the ability to live life as He designed.

I ask the Holy Spirit to come to you and empower you to forsake your sin and experience His life in you today.